
17
Kazuma Kamachi
Illustration by
Kiyotaka Haimura
A Certain Magical Index

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ILLUSTRATION BY
KIYOTAKA HAIMURA



[CURTANA SECOND]
A ceremonial sword passed down in the British royal family for generations. Used for the monarch's coronation, it grants its owner the same type of power, albeit simulated, that Michael the Archangel possesses. However, this Curtana—currently owned by Elizard, queen of Britain—is a second blade. The Curtana Second is a backup of the original, created artificially by the Royal Family Faction. The whereabouts of the Curtana Original that first appeared are historically unknown.



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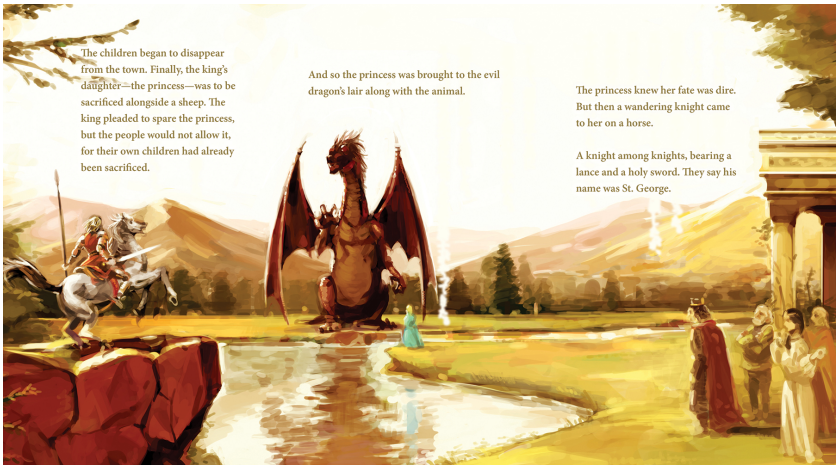


Prologue

Long, long ago, there was a town. The town was surrounded by castle walls, and the king and his people lived within.

One day, an evil dragon approached the town. The king and his people worked together to defeat it, but they failed. The evil dragon, now angered, let loose its powerful breath and tormented the town.

To placate the dragon, the king and his people sacrificed two sheep every day. But they had only so many sheep. When the sheep grew scarce, they began to sacrifice one sheep and one child every day.



The children began to disappear from the town. Finally, the king's daughter—the princess—was to be sacrificed alongside a sheep. The king pleaded to spare the princess, but the people would not allow it, for their own children had already been sacrificed.

And so the princess was brought to the evil dragon's lair along with the animal.

The princess knew her fate was dire. But then a wandering knight came to her on a horse.

A knight among knights, bearing a lance and a holy sword. They say his name was St. George.

A Certain Magical Index

VOLUME 17

KAZUMA KAMACHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYOTAKA HAIMURA

YEN ON
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A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX, Volume 17
KAZUMA KAMACHI

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CHAPTER 1

Disorder in a Casual Exchange
Irregular_Spark.

1

The morning of October 17.

Even though El Niño had been dragging the hot spell along until just a few days ago, London's Little Tokyo was enveloped by a chill that coiled around people's feet like a snake.

It was the middle of rush hour for people going to work and school, and no matter where you looked, people flooded the streets. For some reason, not a single tourist was among them, but nobody would bother to point it out or wonder why. Everyone knew the reason.

Itsuwa, a girl from the Amakusa-Style Crossist Church, was also in the tourist-less Little Tokyo.

Like in Chinatown and Little India, one of the pillars supporting Little Tokyo was its food. People who you could talk to—the natural way—all gathered there to enjoy the tastes of home in a foreign country. In fact, the main street of Little Tokyo was lined with a variety of food places: sushi, set meals, every kind of pot cooking there was.

The apartment where Itsuwa took up residence was itself a bento store on the first floor. Obviously, Japanese people living in London visited it, but quite a few English businesspeople who were partial to Asian tastes stopped by, too, on their way to work to pick something up. Office workers in a hurry also seemed quite appreciative of how they could buy and receive their food as fast as at an F1 pit stop, thanks to the Japanese virtue of punctuality.

Similarly, Itsuwa would sometimes get roped into helping around the bento shop, but she wasn't currently doing that kind of job. And unlike during work hours, she was wearing personal

clothes.

Many of Itsuwa's outfits for London were chic but mature. At the moment, she wore a short jacket over a light-beige sweatshirt and slim, olive-brown pants. Luckily for her, she—a minor—only had to pay attention to her clothing and then she could sneak into a nighttime pub, which greatly helped her work for Necessarius.

But right now, in the employee break room behind the shop proper, she looked at a Japanese website on a laptop, quivering.

"Making sure your partner remembers you is the key to long-distance relationship success! If you don't make a strong impression, you might find the cord cut before you know it! Read on to find out the difference between those who succeed and those who fail!!"

With trembling fingers, she scrolled down. "Success method one: the predatory special tactic! A stronger woman with more appeal will overwrite his feelings!!"

The moment she read that, she thought back to what had happened just a few days ago.

To guard Touma Kamijou from Acqua of the Back's aim, she'd ended up glued to his side. She'd tried everything she could think of to narrow the distance between Japan and London, half a world away…but the Priestess of the reborn Amakusa-Style Crossist Church, Kaori Kanzaki, had shown up partway through and, after causing a massive amount of inflation, brought out an unbelievable one-hit-kill secret move.

In other words…

A…an erotic fallen-angel maid…!! I had no idea she had such a formidable card up her sleeve, but I should have expected no less from our Priestess! With that kind of thing on the table, that must be all he can remember about the Acqua battle…!

Itsuwa buried her face in her hands in anguish.

She glanced at her own trendy, mature-feeling—put another way, extremely safe—outfit, then heaved a deep, deep sigh.

Was this what set geniuses apart from the masses? Would an ordinary sorcerer ever reach the level of a saint? Tatemiya, also from Amakusa, teased her about having "closeted-huge knockers," but would she ever rival Kanzaki's "normal-huge knockers"? The image, burned all-too-vividly into her brain, came back to mind—those breasts of hers, those thighs, that erotic maid outfit with the you-know-what, threatening to make her faint outright. She could

never beat that.

…To clarify, it wasn't as though Kamijou and Itsuwa had built anything special between them, but it didn't seem to matter to her anymore. Maidens in love had a way of being blind to things.

Sh-she's mastered how to use those giant breasts completely and then combined them with an erotic fallen-angel maid costume in a heavy-hitting strategy. A boob strategy with heart, technique, and physique all at once…Such is the might of the Priestess. One shot—one shot was all she needed to take everything. I might not even have a chance to turn the tables anymore…

Itsuwa sighed tiredly, skimming through the suspicious "news website."

Then her eyes stopped on a corner of the site, set apart from the rest of the article, called "This Week's Ten News Tidbits." And there it was.

"Their rumored new product is the Great Fairy Flashy Maid!! A destructive force indicative, as always, of a creator with a Z-type brain! Goes on sale this autumn to oddly high demand!!"

Time slowed to a halt within Itsuwa.

Had she caught up with the saint?

Had the time come for her to match—no, to surpass even sainthood?

She thought for a moment, the once-in-a-lifetime chance before her very eyes…

But she groaned. "I can't wear something like this!!"

Her hands made a manic back-and-forth journey through her hair as she went with the exceedingly honest choice. She slumped over the table, hating herself for it. She whimpered, slightly seriously, knowing that stopping here or diving in was probably what separated the ordinary from the extraordinary.

…Incidentally, from a corner of the break room's ceiling came whispered voices: "(No!! Itsuwa, one more push!! Nooo!!)" "(We should buy it for her and put the whole thing, cardboard box and all, in front of her room!!)" "(Vicar pope…or rather, Tatemiya! You have a rough idea of Itsuwa's body type and breast size from the great massage mission, right?!)" "(Indeed. If we are to bear witness

to a battle between an erotic fallen-angel maid and a great-fairy flashy maid, we must shed a suitable amount of our own blood and sweat!!)" "(Enough already. Get back to work, you bums…)"

Itsuwa didn't notice them.

2

Meanwhile, the rumored erotic fallen-angel maid, Kaori Kanzaki, gave a slight shiver, as though she'd sensed the strange emotions from a distance.

At the moment, she was walking down a suburban road near Buckingham Palace. This was the British royal family's base of operations, and for Kanzaki—and the rest of the Puritan Faction, one of the three British factions—it wasn't a very familiar area. The other two factions—the Royal Family and the Knights—exerted too much influence over it.

…If someone were to ask what Kanzaki was doing in a place like that, it was because she'd come to the Home Office near the palace to request a release of some documents. But on the way, she'd run into a familiar face.

It was the top of the Knight Faction—the Knight Leader.

She couldn't deny that he was dressing a little young for his age today, but he was in his mid-thirties or so, twice Kanzaki's age, so she might not have been the best judge of it. However, his physical appearance—with neat blond hair and clean-cut features—combined with the quality of his suit and even the way he walked—every step with his spine straight—all fit the format of royal castles and palaces.

In fact, Kanzaki found the Knight Leader rather hard to deal with.

And it wasn't because he smelled slightly of the air characteristic to noble society or anything of the sort.

"In terms of social events, we have a night party at Windsor Castle and a yacht party in Liverpool during October, but I believe the most suitable would be the ball at the queen's residence, which doubles as a birthday party for James of the House of Lords. The invitees will be a somewhat dingy bunch, none with enough prudence to show deference to the guest of honor, should they unthinkingly attempt to involve themselves with her. Should the party cause anything to happen, it would smear mud in Lord

James's face, after all."

"No, I, well, um…" Kanzaki began to lose her calm, still holding her giant document-filled envelope.

The Knight Leader watched her face and frowned slightly. "Hmm. If you're looking for something a bit more high-grade, there will be a masquerade held at Buckingham Palace for Halloween, but I'd advise against your first party being one where you hide your face and name…Or perhaps the clientele isn't to your fancy? You would not tolerate any amorous gazes from others, I'm sure. In that case, it is somewhat far away, but an invite-only event is coming up in Edinburgh—"

"No, that's not what I'm talking about," managed Kanzaki, eyes drifting away from the man. "B-besides, all these night parties and balls…Umm, part of the reason you go there is to meet others, right…? I do lead a unit under the English Puritan Church's command, so I should avoid such things—"

"Not necessarily," interrupted the Knight Leader. "Still, I thought you were the one who wanted to learn proper English behavior in England."

"I, that is…," stammered Kanzaki as the rush-hour pedestrian traffic filed around them.

The Knight Leader watched her dubiously. "I do apologize for prolonging your plans, but I truly wish to see any requests through to the end. Please, you may rely on me when it comes to matters of societal etiquette."

"N-no, that was back when I'd just arrived in Britain and wanted to study courtesy and the natural features of the region for casting Amakusa-Style spells. I have no particular desire to live in the world of aristocrats."

With help from Motoharu Tsuchimikado, also Japanese, she had at this point already studied things far beyond the broad idea of "Britain," even including subtle accent variations between regions. She was fairly sure there was nothing left for the Knight Leader to teach her.

"Still, you do not, in fact, appear at many parties or balls. Might you feel ill at ease in high society?"

"…As an English Puritan, I feel no real need, so I don't have any reason to go to events like that."

"Leading a just and proper life and polishing your aristocratic beauty are separate things. Beauty is not synonymous with

deception, either. If you are just, then no matter where you go, you will remain just. Do we not see such messages from legends like that of Saint Agnes, who, when brought to a brothel, transformed it into a radiant place for missionary work in the blink of an eye?"

"…Mentioning a brothel in your metaphor tells me you're aware of how dangerous these night parties can be for women, and yet you're still inviting me." *I heard he came carrying a ring of flowers to invite me to a ball while I was away once, too…*, she thought, sighing.

The Knight Leader, for some reason, looked confused at her reaction. "So you say, but aren't you starting to emulate the lifestyle of a noblewoman yourself?"

"Where on earth did you hear a rumor like that?"

"…Hmm. How odd. Was my information about the erotic fallen-angel maid costume incorrect…?"

Kanzaki sputtered, expelling air at a terrifying speed.

The Knight Leader frowned. "I cannot very well call that befitting of a noblewoman."

"I, what, you, what, wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you…?!"

"Still, as a British gentleman, it would be a lie to say I had no interest in the erotic or in maids…I cannot tolerate a fallen angel, however. It isn't as though a noblewoman's beauty is something determined by exterior charms alone. The inside is what deserves more significance—the beauty of your personality, for example, is —"

"Please wait. Listen to what I have to say!! That was an extremely irregular phenomenon, and it's not like me putting that thing on is an indication of what my future will look like!!"

"Come to think of it, the young lady Sylvia, a waiting maid for the Guards, is a saint as well, training to be both a maidservant and a warrior…Do the women in this country all start at the bottom as a maid in order to learn proper feminine behavior?"

"Umm, Sylvia is employed as a medium by the top of our divine royal system, so I feel she's built quite a position for herself— Wait! That's not the important argument right now; it's that an erotic maid is about the last thing I want to be in the future!!"

Kanzaki flew into a panic, but for the Knight Leader's part, there must have been nothing he was concerned over, because he didn't pursue the point further.

"Still," he went on, "you would be killing two birds with one

stone, so to speak. You could learn the behavior of a noblewoman in society while at the same time introducing your name and face to them as a warrior. In that sense, too, allow me to advise against going to the masquerade, as it would hide that."

"…So that's what you're after," said Kanzaki with a sigh, eventually calming down. "As I've said many times in the past, I'm not planning on transferring from the Puritans to the Knights. My swordsmanship is only one facet of a whole host of spells. My faith is what drives me. Learning the way of the sword wasn't my main goal, so it would be rude of me to take on the title of knight or warrior. Besides, isn't the world of knights men-only?"



“We allow a queen to reign, and yet we don’t allow the knights who serve her to be female. It’s contradictory. If you were to ask me to choose between useless traditions and useful combat power, well, I should think I have enough character to choose the latter.”

“Even then, my answer would be the same. I will show myself as my best, along with the others in Amakusa. I’ve no intention of creating a position for myself by abandoning the people who look up to me.”

“I see,” murmured the Knight Leader. He muttered something quite interesting about the Knights treating Amakusa as mercenaries in that case.

“You can feel free to invite a nun to a night party, though.” Kanzaki shook the envelope in her hand and tried to force the conversation in another direction, showing the Knight Leader the documents she’d gotten from the Home Office. “I should save any merry-making for after I solve this problem.”

“Hmm.”

He couldn’t have seen through to the envelope’s contents, but just a glance at its blank surface gave him a guess as to what she wanted to say.

Kanzaki watched him, then asked, “How is the Eurotunnel?”

The Eurotunnel was a giant underwater subway tunnel, the only land route connecting the British archipelago to France on the mainland. The three passages, packed closely together for their underground run, were an important enough infrastructure to be called “a lifeline for the transportation of personnel and goods,” but…

“No prospects for restoration,” said the Knight Leader shortly. “Rescue efforts in the flooded area have largely ended. Uncovering the cause comes next. It’s clear that this was not a natural incident, but we don’t know if it was sorcery or scientific. Or who, from which group, did what. Depending on the result, the time may come when the Knights will have to go to war as well.”

That was the level of crisis currently unfolding in Britain.

…Kanzaki suspected that was why his attempts at persuasion had been so forceful today, but this wasn’t the time to stray down that side road.

“I heard tensions in France are rising, too.”

“They have several other tangled circumstances, but they’ve been making false accusations of their own. Well, it goes both ways. It seems like both the Parliament and our military have been struggling to soothe the more prideful among them who suggest we initiated preemptive hostilities against France.”

Controlling the parliamentary government was the Royal Family’s job, and protecting the Royal Family was the Knights’ responsibility. He must have been hearing all sorts of things while on duty.

“We’ve had several domestic groups acting suspiciously, too, trying to take advantage of the chaos,” said Kanzaki. “The ones who have stopped short in the past are starting to convince themselves that they can win.”

“…And all that involves the contents of that envelope. You believe a real sorcerer’s society is mixed in with those anti-government organizations?”

“We don’t have confirmation, but if it turns out to be true, any suppression activities conducted by the normal police will almost one hundred percent meet with defeat. For now, we need to conduct a thorough investigation. That’s what the Puritan Faction is for, after all.”

“Enemies from without and within. We both have a lot on our plates.”

“Yes.” Kanzaki nodded. “We don’t seem to have much time for amusement. Or for worrying over what color dress to wear to any evening parties, for that matter.”

3

Utterly ignorant of that particular disquieting conversation, one incredibly normal and unfortunate high school student, the spiky-haired Touma Kamijou, had finished his last class of the day and was enjoying a short break before homeroom started.

This was Academy City, Japan.

It was an institution for the development of supernatural abilities among the populace, boasting a citizenry of a little less than 2.3 million but a surface area around one-third that of the Tokyo metropolitan area, which housed around eight million. If someone looked around, they would see nothing but schools, schools, and more schools; it was a city of students, and at that very

moment, a rippling wave was approaching—the city would soon begin preparations for the super-giant Ichihanaran cultural festival in November. Due to certain circumstances, midterms had been suspended, heightening the sense of relaxation in the hearts of the student body.

In one particular classroom, where students had formed small groups of their own, the atmosphere was no different; everyone was in a slightly giddy mood. In fact, Blue Hair and Motoharu Tsuchimikado were near Kamijou now.

"Wait, is the Ichihanaran Festival different for high school than middle school?" asked Blue Hair in his customary, phony-sounding Kansai accent. "If we got more of a budget, it would expand all the stuff we could do."

"Nya. Let's be real here—this is an open-campus event where people can come on field trips to the schools, so unless we're competitive, we won't be getting much more of a budget, see. This is a totally average school with no ambition, so it looks like we're competitively at the bottom of the ladder."

The two of them wasted no time griping about money problems.

A female student named Seiri Fukiyose, who had black hair, a broad forehead, a huge chest, and an extreme fondness for administrative committees (and not in the sense that she'd throw herself at any boys in such committees), folded her arms and sniffed pridefully.

"The world's largest cultural festival, the Ichihanaran Festival, is just around the corner," she articulated. "And that means my season has finally come. If the lot of you have time to waste, why not put those tiny brains of yours to work looking for a way to use the money efficiently? You could discover a new part of yourself… Especially you, the spiky-haired jerk rolling up eraser pieces and playing with them!!"

Touma Kamijou's shoulders instantly twitched. "Wh-what? Find yourself…sure. The most that could possibly happen is that you thought you were into maids before, but you found out you were actually into waitresses the whole time."

"Nya!! That's extremely important!! Maids can do a waitress's job, but waitresses can't handle a maid's job! You haven't forgotten that fact, have you, fool?!"

"Heh…fools. There's no rule saying just because you're into

maids, you can't also be into waitresses. Still, staying faithful to just one favorite genre—I can't say that's a bad thing."

When the three idiots offered their own varied responses, Fukiyose, her bossy spirit(?) fired up by the approaching Ichihanaran Festival but now trampled, erupted as always. Shouts followed: "You…Do something about your absurd thought processes already, you freaking morons!!"

"No, this discussion is absolutely necessary for deciding whether we'll do a normal café or a maid— *Ghghrgh!!*"

Kamijou took a head-butt and went flying.

He rolled across the floor and finally came to a stop near his classmate Aisa Himegami's seat. She, too, had long black hair (but not huge breasts). She was flipping through the pages of a thick book, looking somewhat serious about it.

Kamijou shot to his feet, wondering what she was reading. He looked over her shoulder at the tiny letters, trying to catch a glimpse.

"____In order to prevent yourself from being buried in an energy-filled classroom, when all is said and done, you need a light to push others out of the way—yes, you need attack power. And attaining that attack power doubtlessly requires individuality. Your best option is to have some sort of special skill, but if that's too hard on such short notice, joining a club or a committee is another option. The simple change in your lifestyle rhythm will be the factor that begins changing you inside and out—"

"……"

Touma Kamijou made a complicated expression and glanced at the back of Himegami's head.

"…Hey, if you've got a problem or something, you can talk to me."

"I'm fine. I'll try my best on my own."

"O-oh. Well, if there's one piece of advice I have for you—all in all, didn't you, ah, have a more peaceful character trait? You know, flawless cooking skills?"

"?!"

"Ha-ha-ha. You make your own bento to bring to school every day. That means you already have some intense attack power, right? Mr. Kamijou makes his own food, too, but not nearly as well as you do."

"I—I…Could it be…? What I was looking for…was inside me all

along…?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’ve entered a golden age. By using my magical bento, I’ll leave my days of being an embarrassed, expressionless girl behind.”

“W-well…Mm, probably…?”

That’s when it happened:

Their homeroom teacher, Komoe Tsukuyomi, entered the classroom.

“Okay, everyone, it’s time to start homeroom! Today, we’ll be deciding everyone’s jobs for the festival. Please tell me if you want to prioritize your clubs or committees for work instead!”

“_____”

Aisa Himegami froze solid.

One hundred thirty-five centimeters tall with the appearance of a twelve-year-old—an elementary school backpack would look good on her—and yet with an excessive fondness for beer and cigarettes. A wide-spanning knowledge not only of her specialty—pyrokinesis—but much more, including extracurricular research into AIM diffusion fields, which even scholars were split over how to handle…It wasn’t just one or two unique characteristics. No matter how a person looked at her, Komoe Tsukuyomi was a *monstrously irregular teacher made up entirely of unique character traits*. Faced with such an extraordinary person, Himegami was forced to rethink her own individuality—and came to one conclusion.

“…Hhauu.”

“H-Himegami? Why did you fall into utter despair and collapse like that? Himegami, *Himegamiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii*!!”

Kamijou shook her by the shoulders, but she was no longer capable of answering him.

4

Mikoto Misaka was restless.

She was in a downtown area, the lighting now closer to night than twilight. She didn’t change the time she was usually out, but with the seasons turning, the sunset was coming earlier. Before much longer, they’d move up the all-school closing time.

But there was a different reason she was restless.

…How…How could I have said that?! I wasn’t even thinking about the consequences…!!

In the back of her mind was a string of conversations she'd had with a spiky-haired boy in District 22, the largest underground area in Academy City.

Touma Kamijou had looked like he was going to die, and when she saw him trying to drag his near-expired body into some kind of incident, even Mikoto couldn't stay calm. Her panic had forced her to act instinctively; she knew she had to stop him, but she also had no plan, so she'd simply spilled everything on her mind at the time…

Th-this is bad. Bad for a lot of reasons, like how when I remember it I start feeling really itchy and creepy somewhere below my sides!!

She'd been in solitary anguish for the past few days, which had made her roommate Kuroko Shirai suspicious. Her only saving grace (probably thanks to Mikoto's own defensive instincts kicking in) was that she hadn't had the chance to accidentally run into the boy in town.

If she saw him now, she knew her mind would fly away without her.

For now, she figured that after she waited for these problems of the heart to resolve themselves, she'd be able to meet him again in the same way as usual. Unfortunately…

"Hmm? Hey, it's Biri Biri. What are you doing here?"

"???!!!"

Mikoto's shoulders jumped at the sudden voice addressing her from behind. She nervously turned around—it was the spiky-haired kid in question.

"D-does it really matter? I'm just kicking vending machines like I usually do!!"

"Actually, uh, that seems like it matters," said Kamijou wearily.

Mikoto, for her part, was busy wondering what the heck was going on.

…Not that she hated this.

According to all her simulations beforehand, she was sure she'd die of embarrassment the moment she ran into Kamijou. Even if he hadn't talked to her, she'd predicted she'd feel really awkward about it anyway.

But now that it had happened, it was nothing much.

In fact, she felt relieved by their first conversation in days.

"I, well…Are your wounds all right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Wait—oh…I don't really remember since my

mind was all hazy, but you found out, didn't you?"

Kamijou, though, gave a slightly lonesome expression.

Mikoto thought she didn't see him look like that very much.

"It would help me out if you kept quiet about it to them. I don't want everyone to start walking on eggshells just because I lost my memory, you know? I can get by normally, so it would be great if you treated me like you have until now."

"O-oh."

While Mikoto was struggling with her own emotions, Kamijou changed the topic. She couldn't keep up with the blindingly swift changes—which seemed that way only because of how furiously Mikoto's mind was currently spinning its wheels.

"And that vending machine, too. You shouldn't do high kicks and stuff in front of people when you're wearing a skirt. You might have on short pants underneath, but that doesn't change how you can see up to the top of your thighs."

"…"

"Huh? …How strangely meek. Misaka, of all people, just started putting coins into the vending machine."

Mikoto couldn't say anything back to that. She thought she'd put up dense walls around her heart, but they were actually all made of sponges, and now the water was pouring in. It was making her eyes spin round and round and round.

"Wh-what the heck is going on…?" she muttered. "Normally, this is where I reject him outright or at least run away for now, so why is this making me so uncomfortable? Darn it, stupid heart!!"

"What? Also, why are you suddenly sparking out like that…? H-hey, you're out of control. You're really sparking and crackling all over the place; did I do something I shouldn't have?!"

"Siiiigh."

"Don't give me tha— *Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagghhhhh!!*"

Crackle-crackle-bzzt!! went the heart-damaging sparks.

5

Himegami and Mikoto had both made this a strange sort of day.

As exhaustion set upon him all at once, Kamijou opened the front door of his dorm.

"…And don't tell me you're acting weird today, too, Index."

“Huh? Weird how, Touma?”

The reaction to his mumblings came from the young, white-clothed nun lying around in the living room. She had long silvery hair, green eyes, and an eidetic memory—the ability to perfectly remember anything she’d seen once. She’d used that unique trait to store every sentence and every letter of 103,000 grimoires in a mental library; she was the Index of Prohibited Books. Lately, though, it hadn’t helped in the slightest. Right now, she couldn’t seem to figure out how to open a can of stewed pork belly cubes, and the can opener she’d gotten tired of using and tossed aside was on the floor. Meanwhile, the small calico sitting next to her was paw-punching her cheek as she lay sprawled out, seeming to say, *Don’t give up! It’s too early to give up on the pork!!*

Kamijou breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, at least you’re the same as always.”

“That sounded like you’re making fun of me.”

“I’d never,” he denied immediately.

After putting his bargain-basement schoolbag on the floor nearby, he flipped the TV to a random channel. A two-hour-long special was on. Covering a collection of miraculous and dramatic rescues from all over the world, it was currently introducing a team of British underwater specialists who had rescued all 370 people trapped when an underwater tunnel had flooded.

“…I just felt a chill. The cat’s in full winter coat mode, too. Maybe it’s almost time to bring it out.”

“B-bring what? Bring what out?! Oh!! You must mean you’re bringing out the rumored blowfish pot today!!”

“Don’t jump to conclusions!! That would warm you up, but it would plunge my finances into an ice age!! Not that, Miss Index; I’m saying it’s almost time to take out the *kotatsu*.”

“What’s that? What kind of food do you put in a *kotatsu* pot? Kotatoes?”

“Move a little farther away from food, Index. This is what a *kotatsu* is!!” Kamijou unveiled the object in question with a shout. The combination of a futon blanket and a table revealed itself within the small storage space by the wall. Kamijou went about replacing the glass table in the middle of the room with the winter set, including:

“Persimmon seeds!!” Index trembled.

“Well, tea and biscuits isn’t the main course for a *kotatsu*,

stupid!! Go ahead, try putting your legs underneath it! And then you'll know for sure just how wonderful Japan's unique heating appliance is!!"

"Ah?" Confused, Index wriggled her legs into the futon.

And then…

"*Fwah*…I feel all sleepy for some reason."

"You realized the truth behind the *kotatsu*'s usage in five seconds. Your senses are unparalleled, Index. But that drowsiness you're feeling is a trap luring you into a cold, so don't let it fool you."

One way or another, Index seemed satisfied with the *kotatsu*. The calico plopped himself down in the middle, asserting that *This comfortable warm space is my castle now*.

Good. Great. I was so confident when I brought it out that I expected her to say, "I don't understand it because it's Japanese culture," and cut my enthusiasm right in half, thought Kamijou, putting his own feet into the *kotatsu*.

Then Index, face brimming with drowsiness, took a bag of rice crisps that resembled persimmon seeds out of the basket on top of the *kotatsu*. She opened the clear packaging with her small hands, then pronounced, "Here's yours, Touma."

"…?!"

It was a miracle.

This girl, who couldn't even make a cup of ramen (because she couldn't wait three minutes with food in front of her), *had just given some of the food in her hand to him*…!!

"What? Why do you look so surprised?"

"N-nothing, no reason!"

"?"

Index gave him a rather dubious look, but she seemed more interested in the new furniture she was witnessing for the first time. Possibly to drive away the sleepiness, she took her feet out from under the *kotatsu* and then pushed her head inside to explore. *Phew. I'm so glad she likes it so much*, thought Touma, loosening up.

Bfft.

He heard a strange noise behind him, from within the *kotatsu*.

Index, who had her face buried underneath the table, immediately stood up from her current position, hoisting the entire

kotatsu up into the air like a weightlifting barbell.

"Toumaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

"E-eeeeeeeeeeek!! Sorry, Index, that was my bad!! But could you at least put that aerial fortress down?! The cat's still on top of it!!"

That's when it happened—

Kamijou's house phone began to ring. In the golden age of cell phones, it was rather rare for the house phone to casually start ringing. Thinking it would let him escape Index and that it might be an emergency network, he went to the phone and picked it up, all the while somehow calming down his roommate.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado was the caller.

"Nya. Kammy, got kind of a long conversation. You free right now, bro?"

"I guess. Why are you using the phone? You live right next door. You could just come visit."

"Well, there's a very compelling reason for that, you see, nya. Also, sorry for calling when you're probably busy with dinner."

"Considering what's happening over here, I'd actually like to thank you…Wait, it's that late already?! Crap, I haven't gotten anything ready for dinner!! Tsuchimikado, if you need something, keep it short!!"

"Huh? Oh, I get it. But, well, you see…Where should I start…? The Eurotunnel explosion…No, that would be too sudden. I'd have to go all the way back to world affairs first—"

"Short, please!! Miss Index is starting to realize dinner will be late tonight, and there's practically angry flames going up all around her!!"

"*I see*," hummed Tsuchimikado, sounding dissatisfied.

"Then I'll keep it short. You're going to Britain—now."

……

"I, um, uhhh, what was that?"

"We've got an airplane ready. Once you get to School District 23, go to the international airport and pick up the stuff in locker number 3293 from the cloakroom service at the third reception desk. Everything you need, like passports, will be in there. You can use your Academy City ID

as your ticket number, so if you tell reception your name is Touma Kamijou, they'll get the stuff for you."

"Uh, wait, hang on! I don't get it! You're leaving out a lot of things!! Britain? *Now?* Isn't there way more stuff you need to explain first?!"

"Kammy, you were the one who said to keep it short."

"Well, yeah, but you're being really blunt today for some reason!! Why do I have to go to Britain? …Wait. I have a bad feeling about this. First Chioggia, Italy; then Avignon, France… Nothing good ever happens when I travel overseas!! And this time, the destination is home to not only tons of sorcerer's societies but also the headquarters for English Puritanism!! This is super terribly bad!!"

"Hmm. Kammy, your prediction is pretty much on the mark, but I'll tell you this: It's already too late."

Right after he said that, Kamijou heard a shrill clattering noise from the balcony, like an iron pipe clunking to the ground. Apparently, someone had thrown something over from an adjacent room.

Kamijou looked to see a small can, similar to hairspray.

Then he heard a rush of gas coming out of it.

"*Ubrhgh!! Hack, cough!!* B-breathable knockout gas?!"

"Right, one last thing. You're generally having a bad time anyway—whether or not you're abroad, isn't that right?"

That was a surprising thing to say, but he didn't have any room to object.

Kamijou and Index (and the calico), attacked by an unreasonable drowsiness that seemed to be paralyzing their whole bodies, were forced to shift into deep sleep.

6

"The explosion accident in the Eurotunnel connecting Britain and France is affecting air travel. Because multiple aircraft have mobilized to transport goods and personnel between the two nations, it is possible our normal schedules will see delays. For detailed takeoff and landing schedules, please see the reception desk at your—"

Touma Kamijou awoke to an announcement.

When he came to, he was on a bench in an airport lobby.

"…Today's getting a little too dynamic for my taste…"

He shook his head, which felt strangely heavy, then got up and felt a rustling. There was a small note near his hands. According to it…

Nya. You're too late for the last trains and buses since they stop at all-school closing time. I emptied your wallet, too, so you can't use a taxi to get back, sucker. There's a few British bills in the cloakroom luggage, so have a nice trip!

…*You bastard*, he thought. He considered taking the luggage and going home, but he couldn't use British pounds for Japanese taxis. He could have just exchanged it for yen, but banks were probably closed this late at night.

Anyway, if I'm going outside the city, don't I need to have a transmitter nanodevice implanted or go with a parent or guardian? I feel like it's been all dirty tricks lately…

As he wondered what was going on, he grabbed Index's shoulders—she was sleeping on the bench like he'd been—and shook them. "Hey, Index, wake up already."

"Mm, ohhh…I feel like I could sleep like this for three days."

"You're supposed to be scared. That's not natural. You too, cat."

The small cat, front legs twitching, awoke from his dream, sniffed Kamijou's fingertip, then finished waking up. Index was having trouble doing the same, as usual, so Kamijou dragged her away and walked to this "third reception desk" or whatever it was.

"Mr. Touma Kamijou, correct? I have your things from 3293. Would you like me to bring them here, sir?" asked the lady at the reception desk.

Kamijou couldn't figure out whether they had enough things or not. For now, he decided to nod and accept the enormous suitcase from her, then popped it open to examine its contents.

Inside were foreign-looking bills and passports, flight tickets, something that looked an awful lot like a letter of instruction, as well as a few changes of clothes that must have been purchased at a super-cheap chain store.

Kamijou took the flight tickets, read what was printed on them, and groaned to himself. "Are you serious? It really does have the name of a London airport on here."

"Wait, why do we have to go to Britain right now anyway?"

"Well…Oh, wait, there's something scribbled here."

He glanced at the sheaf of papers that contained instructions, but his mind was still shaky from the knockout gas he'd inhaled.

Normally, he'd have been more careful while reading, but somehow his head couldn't quite process what his eyes were seeing.

"…Hmm…It seems like…there's some big sorcery problem going on in Britain, and they wanted to extend a formal invitation to you, Index…," he muttered aloud. "And…Index's current guardian is Touma Kamijou…so I have to come with you or something…"

"They think you're my guardian? That's a surprising evaluation."

"Little kids who get other people to cook them food every day don't get to talk." Kamijou sighed. "Do we really have to do this? It honestly seems like a big pain."

Sorcery troubles that were manifestly important enough to call Index all the way there made him not want to go, but if he made a break for his student dorm now, he was pretty sure the flame sorcerer Stiyl Magnus or someone like him would come to attack him in real life. Apparently, the problem was too big to be ignored.

Wait, wasn't there some big explosion in some tunnel or other in Britain recently? …I'm getting all sorts of bad feelings about this…

Still, nothing would come of whining about it.

Which meant he had to go through the boarding process.

Time passed quickly while they were putting their pet in a tagged cage and passing through the metal detector (just like the time they went to Chioggia, her safety-pin-covered habit set it off again).

"Britain, huh?" said Index, wearing a plain dress from their suitcase's super-cheap stack of clothes changes.

Kamijou gave her a blank look. "Now that you mention it, the English Puritan Church's headquarters is summoning us there. That means you're going back to your homeland, where you were born, right?"

"Well, it doesn't feel very real. I mean, I don't have any memories from before a year ago," she said. She wasn't forcing herself to not worry about it, either—she honestly didn't seem to care very much. She'd even left the papers with instructions for when they were in Britain with him.

…No memories, huh…?

Not noticing what Kamijou was thinking, Index asked, "Touma, where's the aerialplane-thing we're going to ride?"

"Hm? Tsuchimikado said he got one ready just for us."

One wall of the arrivals and departures lobby was a glass pane. Through it was a runway stretching out into the night. Several large passenger planes were there, with self-driving cars for workers weaving between them as they went.

"Umm, it says it would be flight 0001 waiting at gate four, but __"

When he looked in that direction, he froze.

What he saw was a waiting passenger plane.

Max speed of over seven thousand kilometers per hour.

The very monstrous plane that could shoot from Japan all the way to Europe in two hours.

At that very moment, the nightmare from when they were on the emergency flight from Chioggia back to Japan went through both their minds: how Index had recklessly ordered in-flight food while in that realm of eerie suffering, their hearts compressed by severe g-forces—and it had all gone flying backward in the plane.

"…"

"…"

While they reflected upon it, preparations for the supersonic passenger jet's takeoff were proceeding smoothly. A forklift carried a container to it—maybe their calico was in there. As the two of them thought to themselves some more, they began to mutter idly.

"Hey, Index."

"What is it, Touma?"

"Let's give up on that flight and get the next one, even if we have to wait for the cancellation to go through. A flight that's normal and not harmful to humans."

"I'm okay with any aerialplane where my food doesn't go flying behind me."

Kamijou and Index exchanged a firm handshake, then quietly saw the supersonic passenger plane off.

Somehow, they thought they could hear the calico cry out that they were heartless.

INTERLUDE ONE

It looks like France is finally acting, doesn't it?

The Roman Orthodox Church may be nagging them from behind, but I have to say, they responded awfully obediently. There's no doubt that an explosion in the Eurotunnel—the only land route connecting the United Kingdom and France—would deal a severe blow to France's economy, too, but nonetheless. To think they'd blow up all three parts of the seafloor tunnel…

But they still don't have it worse than Britain.

Yes, you're certainly right.

For an island nation, destroying the only accessible land route is like cutting off half its lifeline. For now, they're preventing any supply shortages by adding more voyages and flights to their sea and air routes, but soon enough, their costs will go into the red and past what they can handle.

After all, it's far less expensive to transport the same amount of goods by train than by airplane.

Some optimistic critic was saying that if they relied on water transportation, it would solve the problem. But that's not in the cards. When the Eurotunnel opened, it devastated several ports—they'd be using the tunnel instead. They can talk all they want about going back to entirely water-based transport, but the flow of goods will only dry up. It would cause traffic jams, forcing the country to its knees under the sheer weight of the goods that need to be moved, like a department store register during a bargain sale.

It should take three months at minimum to restore the seafloor tunnel. Store shelves won't be the same until that's finished. Plus, the restoration work is fraught with a complex web of motives. It would be stranger if no troublesome situations arose.

Hm? Oh, yes, you're right.

France has the European countries behind them, controlled by the Roman and Russian factions. Britain has Academy City's support, and they've apparently requested more aid from the U.S.

Hah.

This will be a war between the euro and the dollar, won't it?

The U.S. suffered the most economic damage from the document incident in Avignon. Investors' attention is already elsewhere. It's precisely because they know they're in a tight situation that they're terrified of the euro and the market based on it getting a boost. Enough to make them want to trip up their enemies.

Our idiotic Terra of the Left is responsible for this stupid state of affairs.

You know just as well as the rest of us, don't you?

You were the one who personally ended him.

This incident directly originates in the centuries of bad blood between Britain and France. But since the U.S. economy and the European economy are clashing, we've entered a state of Anglo-French cold war.

Europe will go nuts.

What's starting now isn't a war between individual nations.

No, it won't end there.

It looks like that bastard Fiamma would like nothing more than to turn the entire continent into a sea of flames. What pisses me off the most is that Fiamma is the very person in complete control of nearly the entire Roman-Russian faction. You and I can give whatever orders we want. Nobody's left to listen to them. We have no authority.

You're going anyway?

I'll admit, you've got quite a bit of strength. If it came down to a stupid straight-up brawl, you might be better than me.

But will your strength help against a calamity that threatens to destroy entire nations, the entire world? There are no enemies or allies, no direction to go—it's like a disaster movie, attacking equilibrium from all directions. How effective will that strength of yours be, I wonder?

Well, if you want to go, I won't stop you.

I don't have the right, and I don't have any duty to care about your life, either.

But I will tell you my plans. I'm not going. Eh? Don't speak in

that tone to me. No, I'm not scared. I can't use my divine judgment spell anymore. God's Right Seat—well, other than you—can't use normal sorcery or Soul Arms. I'm just going to stop by a few places and make some of the preparations I need to.

Besides, my plans will probably be more effective at frustrating Fiamma than waltzing right into the fray like an idiot.

Nobody gives me orders.

You walk your own path, and I'll walk mine.

Eh?

Wasn't your catchphrase "nothing is impossible for me"?

It doesn't matter, does it?

I just say whatever fits my mood at the time. What, do I look like a clever person with self-restraint?

CHAPTER 2

Steel Battlefield Floating Above the Clouds
Skybus_365.

1

Itsuwa, girl of Amakusa, puffed out her cheeks with an irritated glare.

When she heard the boy, Touma Kamijou, would be using an Academy City–made supersonic passenger jet to arrive, she ran all over putting things together, then went to a London airport to be his Japanese-speaking guide—but now that she was there, he was nowhere to be found. Something strange must have gone wrong, because the only thing that ended up in her hands was a calico in a cage, registered as their pet.

This was supposed to be her chance! She'd buy anything, even the Great Fairy Flashy Maid Set!! She'd gotten so enthusiastic about it, she was considerably disappointed. Bearing the small calico-carrying cage, she'd gone back home to Little Tokyo, where she, a minor at her own dining table, was guzzling down a 1.8-liter bottle of alcohol. She even had dried squid on a small plate to go with it.

They told her that boy would be coming with the Index for business.

Watching Itsuwa, their faces pale, were her roommates, the tiny Kouyagi and the female Tsushima. The large Ushibuka's shock, in particular, had been great—he'd hidden that bottle of potato *shochu* in a storage space under the kitchen floor.

"U-um, excuse me, Itsuwa…? I-it was just a slight mishap. Do you really need to be so depressed over it…?" asked the married Nomozaki gently, putting a stranglehold on Ushibuka, who threatened to go crazy over his precious "duke of potatoes" being swiped.

In response, Itsuwa poured more of the liquid into her very

unadorned clear cup.

"*Hic*…I'm not…I'm not depressed…Damn it. That's right; that's right. Why would I…?"

Mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter. Itsuwa's lips remained still as she mumbled incomprehensibly, mostly venting at this point.

"…God, just what…what's this 'duke of potatoes' anyway…? You can't…can't even tell if it's potatoes or sweet potatoes. What an annoying name for a drink…"

"Then don't drink it!" cried Ushibuka, tears in his eyes. "Don't take away my love!!"

That's when it happened.

The past-middle-aged Isahaya's face lit up as he entered the room, and this was the first shot he fired:

"H-hey!! The young man is still on schedule! He's apparently in London now!!"

With a crash and a clatter, Itsuwa shot to her feet. The bottle tipped over as she did and dribbled its expensive liquid contents onto the table. "*Hgyyaaaah my duke of potatoes!!*" screamed Ushibuka, before the lady Tsushima shut him up with a chop to the neck.

But Itsuwa didn't have time for that.

That boy was in London?

They'd told her at the airport that nobody fitting his description had been aboard, but perhaps it was merely a mistake, and he had been on the plane after all? Which meant—would he…? Would he visit her?!

Itsuwa's face almost began to shine with a soft, dazzling glitter, but then her happy expression abruptly froze.

She noticed something.

The disastrous scene she'd perpetrated.

…She was drunk on potato liquor. With every breath inhaled and exhaled came the stark stench of sake. A dried squid leg was hanging out of the corner of her mouth. Would he see her in such a terrible, unsightly state…?

"I-it's all over!! If that happens, it's all over for me!!"

For now, she just had to do something about appearances. She ate all of the dried squid legs, poured breath mints into her mouth,

washed her face, and tried to stand up crisp and straight. But she was still walking like she was clearly drunk, and her face was as red as an old man's at a horse race.

W-wait. Just because he's in London now doesn't mean it's guaranteed he'll come to Little Tokyo right off the bat. Normally, he'd stop by a hotel, and if he went to Buckingham Palace after that, he wouldn't be coming to Little Tokyo this soon! I just have to focus all my energy on making myself presentable…!!

Despite her rather optimistic thinking, the past-middle-age Isahaya gave her a grave look and shook his head. "It's too late, Itsuwa. The young man is almost here."

Itsuwa's shoulders lurched. Still wobbly, she thought, *But why?! He couldn't possibly have come here by pure coincidence…!!* She did have one clue as to what would bring him here right away, though. *Come to think of it, I took their cat at the airport…No, it's all my fault! Of course they'd come here to get their own cat!!*

Her eyes and mind spinning in a panic, the approaching sound of sharp, heavy footsteps reached her ears. A few frantic moments later, she heard the door click open.

"He's here!!"

The past-middle-age Isahaya's shout rang in Itsuwa's ears.

Her living space was designed in the western style, but there was a paper sliding door between the front door and the rest. She watched as a spiky-haired silhouette appeared, much to her dismay, behind the thin paper.

No matter how she thought about it, he would undoubtedly head straight her way.

Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what-wha-wha-what-what-wh at do I do?!

She'd been driven into a corner.

Itsuwa blanched as, before her eyes, the sliding paper door slid to the side. She was plastered beyond the point of vomiting; the smell of alcohol surely spurted from her very pores. Even the calico she was looking after ended up running away, as if to say, *Young lady, I cannot bear your odor*. Having confirmed the situation again, her mind reached the absolute pinnacle of chaos.

Awah!!

And then…

"Ta-daa!! The spiky-haired Saiji Tatemiya has arriv—

Bghooohhhh?!”

A moment after her black-haired roommate toyed with her maidenly heart, she didn’t flip the table at him—in fact, she grabbed it with one hand and hurled it at Tatemiya with all her might. His tall body bounded back out of the room while Isahaya paled at the spectacle, which he was no doubt soon to be complicit in.


怒髪天
ohatsuten

2

The Skybus 365.

Kamijou and Index had abandoned the calico and boarded an extremely unhurried jumbo jet. The seating area was spread across two levels, and the simple increase in size meant it could hold many passengers and provide more area per passenger. One might immediately think of economy seats being as cramped as a chair in a movie theater, but this Skybus 365 didn't follow that rule. Even the cheapest seats had enough space to stretch your legs. They doubled as massage chairs, too.

If there was one issue with it, however…

"Wow…Didn't think there wouldn't be a single flight going to London," muttered Kamijou to himself.

All flights to London had been fully reserved. Kamijou and Index were still bound for Britain, but they'd be heading to Edinburgh, Scotland, first, then transferring to a domestic flight to reach London—their plan was all thanks to the helpful advice from the lady at the airport's service counter.

Incidentally, Scotland was in the north of the United Kingdom, while London was in the south.

In any case, they were now headed for Britain after finding a flight with seats on the waiting list, but it of course took money to purchase the tickets. Kamijou's had been stolen after Tsuchimikado had emptied his wallet as a ploy to prevent him from fleeing the airport in a taxi, but the one good thing was that he had enough money to buy tickets without a problem by using the virtual wallet on his cell phone.

…But that virtual wallet is like a credit card. I hope the bill isn't enough to make me scream when I see it…

In contrast to Kamijou and his civilian troubles, Index, who had changed from her safety-pin-covered habit into a simple dress (she couldn't board the plane with all those dangerous objects), was in an extremely optimistic mood. She was entranced with this irregular space around her that she called an aerialplane.

"T-Touma, look at all the glowies on this chair!!"

"There are a lot of buttons, yes, but it's not a video game.

Anyway, it's just a TV…Wait, what?! Index, get your hands away from there now! You're watching a channel you have to pay for!!"

"Beef-or-fish!! Beef-or-fish!!"

"I know, you're intent on the in-flight food!! Agh!! The latest movie channel here seems super expensive!!"

"What's this button do? *Wa-hyah!!* A clear cup with a string on it came out!!"

"That's your oxygen mask in case of emergencies!!"

Taking that as a super-serious signal, a hot blond flight attendant paled and ran over. As Index continued punching buttons all over the place as though nothing else mattered, Kamijou ended up being the one to apologize.

While he taught Index basic airplane manners, she cocked her head to the side. "There's glowies that take money and glowies that don't take money?"

"I told you—you can't play games on the screen. All those buttons are a big trap to get you to watch channels you have to pay for. Look, there are plenty of free channels with cool stuff on… Urk?!"

"Touma, it's just a lot of little letters saying things like stocks, whatever those are."

"Damn it. They show boring things on purpose to get you to consider the paid service, don't they?"

Now rather dejected, Touma watched as the man, incredibly unattractive despite being on television, told him all about his cherished opinions on world economics. It looked like the market was in chaos because of the Eurotunnel explosion.

Index slowly straightened up. "By the way, Touma, when does food arrive here on this aerialplane?"

"The in-flight meal? Hmm. It's past dinnertime, so the next meal will probably be in around nine hours. The people around us look like they ate before getting on, and the reason this was cheap is because there's no late-night meal."

"…???!!!"

"*No!* I understand that's a shock, but don't try to bite poor Kamijou's head, Index!! That's just how it works! I can't do anything about it!!"

But since they were late getting to the airport after Tsuchimikado gassed them before dinner, even Kamijou was hungry. Wondering whether there was a shop on board, he looked

around, then spotted a signboard indicating a free drink station near the foremost cluster of seats.

He spoke quietly. “Index, I’m going on a journey.”

“T-to the land of rice balls?!”

“No, this will not be a wonderful land of grains. But for now, I’m going to get some coffee at least.”

Kamijou sprang out of his seat and headed toward the free drink station. The Skybus 365 was a super-large passenger plane with three rows of two seats each. The passenger space could hold over five hundred people in total, and the seating was split up by walls for economy class, business class, and first class. Because the space was then separated into two stories, it actually had twice the volume as well. It was insane.

When he looked around from his new vantage point, he saw that a lot of the passengers weren’t Japanese. Most of the people—sleeping with blankets made of three-millimeter-thick material apparently designed by NASA—looked like businessmen who had been working in Academy City and were now returning home.

Kamijou was in the economy-class section, the farthest one back. The free drink station was stationed on the wall separating economy and business class.

…That’s a way to combat terrorists, too, right?

If he recalled correctly, planes these days didn’t allow passengers to travel with plastic bottles or even tubes of toothpaste, to prevent anyone from bringing liquid bombs aboard. In exchange, airline companies installed free drink stations as a way to comfort their passengers, whose “freedom had been stolen.”

The drink station had a machine that could be found in most family restaurants. The sort where you put the paper cup underneath, pressed the button, and the drink would come streaming out. They didn’t have many kinds of drinks, though. Only four: coffee, black tea, orange juice, and the world’s most famous carbonated drink. The coffee was simply labeled COFFEE, leaving out any additional information like where it was produced or whether it was bitter or acidic. He didn’t even have a choice between hot and iced.

Well, it’s better than nothing, but we went without dinner, so this is kind of bad…Huh?

Then Kamijou’s eyes came to a stop on something.

Right next to the tower of paper cups stacked one on top of the

other were, probably to go with your black tea, plenty of things that looked like square crackers. Their light saltiness was probably for bringing out the flavor of your tea, but…There was no doubt that eating a lot of them would fill his stomach.

Huh. I didn't know airplanes nowadays gave these out for free. Oh, and they've got a lot of toppings, too. Butter, blueberry jam…I knew fuel costs for overseas travel weren't changing anytime soon, so there was a customer service war going on, but I didn't know they were improving this stuff, too…

In that case, I'll have some. I wasn't thinking about food before, but now that I see it in front of me, my stomach is suddenly growling up a storm!! he thought, reaching for the crackers…and then stopping abruptly.

"____"

There was a small box next to the plate of crackers.

And on the box was a note, probably from a flight attendant. In cute lettering, it said:

Available for Purchase

3

Nine hours later.

In the end, he was unable to acquire the price-tagged crackers; the large Skybus 365 passenger plane landed for a time at an airport in France with the empty-stomached Kamijou and Index still aboard.

Refueling or a layover due to no direct flights being available—both were possible, but this time, it was neither.

After a soft *ding*, a woman's voice came over the speaker. After explaining the same thing multiple times in English and Chinese, they heard a Japanese explanation even Kamijou's ears could understand.

"____Due to the effects of the Eurotunnel explosion, this aircraft will be contributing to the transportation of goods between France and the United Kingdom. We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience. Please wait until the additional supplies have finished loading."

As Kamijou listened to the announcement and turned on the small TV attached to the seat, he said to himself, "That reminds me—I think the news said that since that giant tunnel is unusable now, boats and airplanes are carrying goods."

"Touma, we're not taking off yet?"

"Well, we're all having a hard time right now."

Outside the window, darkness covered everything. *We got on the plane after sunset, and nine hours later, it's still sunset. It doesn't add up!!* complained Kamijou's biological clock, but that was the magic of planet-size jet lag.

He couldn't see it from his window, but part of the plane's fuselage was probably open now, where a brigade of forklifts was loading containers on board.

"Touma, is *beef-and-fish* soon?"

"You have to choose one or the other for the in-flight meal. When did you start thinking you could eat both? You weren't thinking you'd eat my portion, too, were you?"

"*Mgh!* That man in the work uniform is eating a sandwich!!"

"Working through his meal? The people at the airport must have it rough, too…Wait, why are you in beast mode, Index?! It doesn't matter how much you rampage through the plane, that sandwich isn't going to warp inside here— *Ow!!* …Huh?"

As Kamijou worked his own arms wildly, his elbow hit something.

He noticed an object that hadn't been there a moment ago. Part of the wall near the window had a square chunk missing; it had opened by itself to reveal what looked like a car's dashboard. And there were about twenty varieties of dangerous cables inside.

What's this?

Something weird opened on its own…?

"…"

Kamijou thought about it for a moment, then used his entire body to slam the cover shut with a *bang*.

Then the hot blond flight attendant walked down the passageway, possibly having heard them talking, before speaking to them in fluent Japanese.

"I'm sorry. We have the utmost consideration for our passengers' schedules, but…"

"I-i-it's fine," stammered Kamijou, waving his hands. "We weren't going to make a formal complaint or anything." He changed the subject to hide his alarm. "Still, is it worth hauling commodities by plane like this?"

"Well, that is…" The flight attendant seemed to have trouble discussing it. "It's just that, of course, we are bringing them in from

a different country, so it would appear that there are many things you can't procure in Britain. Since the seafloor rail tunnel is closed, they're assigning goods to ships and aircraft at the moment…"

"Stuff you can't get in Britain…"

"For example, the United Kingdom is an island country, but nearly half its seafood depends on imports. Seafood would spoil if carried over in slower ships, so they require airplanes. In fact, on our flight specifically, I believe the containers on board may include oatmeal."

"Oatmeal?"

"Yes. I don't know the name of the disease, but…I believe it's been specially made for people who can't eat normal meals. Apparently, it's something you can only get from food corporation facilities in France."

I guess everyone's got their problems, thought Kamijou, looking out the window again.

All sorts of containers were already aboard the plane, but naturally, there was nothing unnecessary. There were enough people having a rough time in Britain to warrant the time spent doing the extra work.

Then…

"…Food…," said Index suddenly. "…Food…Things to eat… aerialplane meals…in-flight food…beef…*beef-or-fish*!!"

"*Gwoohh!!* Index, I get it—we skipped dinner and now your hunger is at max level, but please just calm down!! We're almost to food time!!"

"How long is *almost*?!"

"…About an hour?"

"…???!!!"

"Y-you fool!! Poor old Kamijou's head doesn't taste like beef *or* fish— *Uguh!!*"

Index, overtaken by her carnivorous instincts, attacked Kamijou. It pained him to see the flight attendant shout "I-I'll bring something immediately!!" and run off.

Under attack by the starving Index, Kamijou cried, "Stop, Index!! You're going crazy and making trouble for everyone else!! Also, eating an in-flight meal on your own before you're supposed to— Do you ever stop complaining?!"

"It doesn't matter—my empty stomach has already gone past its limit three times!! I wish you'd understand how urgent the situation

is! I can't wait a minute or even another second!!"

Index took the toy flute the flight attendant had given her before leaving (shaped like a ball, it was probably a points reward from buying plane tickets), gripped it tightly, and began blowing into it shrilly, distracting him.

Meanwhile, as the two of them argued over this and that, contrary to their expectations, the blond flight attendant with the nice body didn't come back.

"?" To Kamijou's confused ears came the following announcement.

"____We're sorry for the wait. Additional cargo loading has completed. We will now begin preparations for takeoff. All passengers, please return to your seats and buckle your seat belts."

"Huh? Oh. The airplane will be slanted when we take off, so it would be dangerous to stand in the aisle. The cart carrying the in-flight food looks like it's fixed in place with metal fittings, too. We'll have to wait to eat until we're back in the air for real."

"…"

"Well, the plane should stabilize after about twenty minutes. You can endure it that long, right? Wait, what? Miss Index, why are you looking down—?"

No answer.

Only a beast-like rumbling.

Please bring food as soon as possible!! willed Kamijou, sensing imminent danger. Unfortunately for him, a Level Zero couldn't use telepathy.

Index's teeth began to grind.

4

The Skybus 365 took off safely.

After the airplane's angle stabilized, they lifted the seat belt restriction for passengers.

The inside of the big passenger plane once again began to provide its comfortable celestial service.

But as Kamijou and Index made use of said service, a man stood a short distance away, observing them.

Actually, it might be more appropriate to say he was overcome with surprise.

The man was standing in the passage.

He wasn't actually an economy-class passenger like they were. He'd gotten a ticket for the adjacent business class so he wouldn't rouse any needless suspicion. He'd gone through the "walled" area separating economy and business class—in other words, past the onboard bathrooms—and walked into the economy-class section, his movements natural. But now…

What's going on? he thought, confused, taking out his notebook.

He'd been reminded before all this not to look at the notebook as much as possible. He was only to use it to reconfirm things when he came up against conditions that actually required serious consideration. Feeling that now was such a time, he hurriedly flipped through the pages filled with jumbled terms and numbers.

The seat number was written right there.

He checked again—there was no doubt.

The seat with that spiky-haired Asian was supposed to be empty.

One of his friends was supposed to have gotten that ticket under a false name.

"…"

The man thought to himself, his index finger tracing the seat number written in the notebook. And he arrived at one answer.

Damn it. The seat was filled by someone waiting for cancellations…?!

Even if a passenger reserved a seat in advance, if they didn't show up after the boarding cutoff time, the seat would be treated as available and possibly given to another guest. That must have been how the spiky-haired Asian ended up in the seat that needed to be empty.

He understood the situation.

But he couldn't come up with a way past it.

What now…?

People would get suspicious if he stood in the middle of the passage for much longer. He began to walk slowly down it, deciding for now to head for the staircase in the back. The large jumbo jet Skybus 365 had two stories. If he used the staircase, then moved to the opposite staircase on the other floor, there would be less risk of people noticing that they'd just seen him.

He put the notebook in his inside pocket. As he walked down the passage and past the spiky-haired Asian, his mind raced at full speed.

What now? If I can't use that seat, I can't put this plan into motion.

5

The in-flight meals were taking their sweet time.

Even after the plane left the runway, soared into the skies, and stabilized its angle, the flight attendant wasn't coming around…And could she even move mealtime up to begin with? Wouldn't her colleagues and superiors get mad at her?

"Hmm. I'm starting to worry. I'm going to go pay the flight attendant a little visit."

"But I'm worried about the *beef-or-fish*, too!!"

"You're just going to make things worse, so stay put."

Besides, if her coworkers were actually chewing the hot blond flight attendant out, he planned to say, *I-I changed my mind—it's fine, really!!* and get them to stop. If Index came along with her starved appetite on full display and a raging torrent of her *Beef-or-fish! Beef-or-fish!!* slogan, the entire situation would definitely fall apart.

So, from the window seat, he stepped over Index's knees and eventually made it into the passageway. His destination was the walled area between economy and business class—the place where amenities like the onboard bathrooms, free drink station, in-flight meal area, and steep stairs to the other floor were all gathered in one place.

Hmm. What will I do if she's actually getting yelled at…?

A little nervous, he went straight down the passage and entered the walled area. As always, it was more dimly lit than the passenger seating areas.

He took a quick look around but couldn't find the flight attendant.

What? This isn't where she is?

He'd guessed—arbitrarily—that she'd be setting up for the in-flight meals, so he'd thought for sure she'd be in here. Apparently, he'd been wrong.

He found a door to a small room that appeared to be where they got all the food together, but he didn't quite know if passengers were allowed to open it without permission, so he gave up on that.

Instead, he brought his ear close to the door. He didn't hear any

sounds of working from inside.

I mean, I could look in a different area, but…It's not like she's inconveniencing us, so it's probably not worth walking around all over the place to chase her.

Just when he decided to go back to Index for now and turned around, it happened.

"Ahhhh?!"

Suddenly he heard a shrill yelp, then heard a *thud*. He must have accidentally pushed someone trying to get around him to the floor.

He looked and saw it was the woman he'd been searching for.

She seemed to have been carrying papers in both hands, but when she'd bumped into Kamijou, they'd gone flying all over. The A4-sized sheets had the small letters of a word processor printed on them, but the words were in a different language, so Kamijou couldn't read any of them.

Besides, this wasn't the time to be reading sentences.

"Yikes! I'm sorry. Are you all—?"

A moment before he bowed in apology, the flight attendant moved swiftly. Still on the floor, she began collecting the scattered papers at an incredible speed.

And then the hot blond flight attendant said this:

"D-did you see…?"

Touma Kamijou answered honestly. "I did not see up your skirt!!"

"?"

The tight-skirted hottie looked at him blankly. That didn't seem to be what she was worried about.

Then what does she think I saw…?

Belatedly, his eyes went to the sheaf of papers the flight attendant was holding.

But before he could examine any pages closely, she stood up in a hurry. "I-I'm terribly sorry," she said. "The in-flight meals, well—we'll bring them out momentarily!!"

"Right, um…"

Kamijou tried to say something, but the flight attendant said "I'm terribly sorry" a second time and went off somewhere.

…*What was that about…?* Kamijou wondered, tilting his head.

He didn't have perfect recall like Index, so he couldn't easily remember the contents of a piece of paper he'd only seen for a

moment.

But he had seen a series of English letters, and what he could faintly remember was…

What was that? The plane's flight number?

And that was all.

6

Starting from the nose, the Skybus 365 was split into three classes: first, business, and economy.

Of course, there was a fourth area even further up than first class:

The cockpit.

The small space was covered in tightly packed buttons and switches—in front, to the sides, and even on the ceiling. Four chairs were in it. The front two were for piloting, and the rear two were for standing by. Right now, a captain and two copilots were permanently stationed there, leaving one space empty.

"Report output from Control is finished."

That was the blond flight attendant.

She was speaking in Japanese.

Normally, she would not have been allowed into the cockpit. It wasn't a purely ethical issue; it was written in the company rules that she couldn't go in. The reason she had set foot in the cockpit in spite of that was simple.

It was an emergency.

"The full text of the threat to the airline company has been received?"

This was spoken by a tall man in a mainly white, military-like uniform.

He was the pilot, the captain of the plane.

He had short-cropped black hair and a tinge of color to his skin.

As the words he spoke would imply, he was Japanese.

And he hadn't been talking to the flight attendant.

He was talking to the flight control center at the international airport in Academy City, Japan, through a headset.

"Awful, isn't it?"

The captain gave a low groan at someone who was presumably an air security officer. "Yeah, it is," he agreed. "Nobody in their right mind would accept these demands."

"*And if we don't, it may put your plane at risk of attack*," continued the security officer bitterly.

"We must be up against a French anti-British organization…"

"Historically speaking, Britain and France switch between enemies and allies a lot, but this will only concentrate the negative feelings from that."

He wasn't sure what route the officer had used to get the information, but anything from an Academy City air security officer tended to be right awfully frequently.

"They're saying things about the Eurotunnel explosion, too: that the whole thing was a British conspiracy, and since France was clearly the victim, Britain should have to pay equal reparations."

"Reparations as in aggressively shutting down British air routes? Idiotic," growled the captain.

For France, the Eurotunnel was one of many important land routes, but for Britain, it was the only one connected to another country. There shouldn't be any reason for Britain to manufacture the explosion, but…

"The individual who sent the threat has been arrested by French authorities, but the one who will actually do the job is apparently elsewhere. Unfortunately, said individual has been keeping quiet, and normal methods to get the information don't seem promising."

"If they're buying time, we'll have a problem," the captain said quietly, gripping the flight yoke. "It'll take us forty minutes to an hour to get from Paris to Edinburgh."

"If this terrorist is for real, it's highly probable they'll make a move in that time."

"But is it true?" asked the captain, unable to resist. "Their allies are on a plane they want to crash?"

"Their primary objective is probably what they stated in the threat. It's safer to expect that the terrorists are prepared to lose their own lives if we don't accept their demands."

"…"

"Whether we accept their demands and stay safe or don't and the Skybus 365 falls, the terrorists will have done the damage they wanted to. Which means no matter which way this goes, they'll treat it as a success."

"…This is awful. I'd almost rather turn around and go back to Paris right now."

"If you suddenly start circling with the plane, the terrorist or

terrorists might become suspicious. We'd run the risk of them making a move immediately. And you don't have the fuel to turn around slowly enough for them not to notice—airline companies are subject to gas prices, after all. I'm sure you understand all that."

"Then all we can do is root out the infiltrator before they make a move."

The captain swore. The Skybus 365 was a rare world-class passenger plane, equipped with two stories of seating. They had over five hundred passengers. Going through and checking them one by one would take far longer than their one-hour limit. And even the police would have a very difficult time locating a criminal simply by observing individuals from a distance without interviewing them.

"…None of us are trained for this."

"You'll have to do it anyway. It would be one thing if you could use an Academy City teleport esper, but right now, you probably can't get anyone from a police agency onto the plane."

The air security officer wasn't trying to be sarcastic. In fact, it was precisely because the Academy City man could suggest teleportation as a viable method that the words came out with such bitterness.

"Other than that…Right. I'm sure you know this, but do your best not to let the passengers know about this problem. Chaos and violence aboard a plane with no escape will turn it into hell on earth."

"I know that. The fate of this plane and my passengers' lives are in my hands. I'm not rotten enough to cling to them and use them as shields."

Just when the captain said that, something happened.

A different channel than air control cut in over the headset.

It was from inside the plane.

"Emergency. We have movement. Likely the terrorist in question!!"

"?!" The captain's body tensed at the crew member's words.

The report continued. *"One injured but conscious. He was apparently attacked from behind and didn't get a good look at the person. What do we do, Captain?!"*

7

Index's starvation had reached its limit.

"In-flight food, in-flight food! *Beef-or-fish…*"

"…I feel such a strong presence next to me. Like a lion with a noble face is sitting one seat over. What is poor Kamijou to do?"

"Not only is the *beef-or-fish* not coming out no matter how long we wait; the bourgeoisie right nearby is munching on those crackers, and it's making my stomach boil and growl."

Kamijou scratched his head. He couldn't exactly do anything, considering Tsuchimikado had stolen his wallet and the only currency in their luggage was in pounds…And then he stopped abruptly.

Index gave him a questioning look.

"…Wait," he murmured. "If this airplane is going from Academy City to Britain, can't we use British money here?"

"???!!!"

"*No!!* I completely understand your anger, Miss Index, but if you bite my skull open, you'll never, ever get those crackers!!"

The beast's maw gaped wide open, its very breath a roar, as Kamijou desperately tried to ward off the imminent crisis. Then, after barely managing to preserve his life, he rose from his seat and headed for the free drink station.

…You know, I've been up and about for a while now. Wonder if anyone thinks I'm suspicious.

He needn't have worried; looking around as he walked down the passage, he saw a fair number of others, who were tired from the extended sitting, doing light stretches in the passage. The seats functioned as massage chairs, but this was still the cheapest class: economy. They didn't seem efficient enough to work out all the knots in your whole body.

In the walled area dividing economy and business class was the free drink area. Next to the crackers was a clear box stuffed with bills from various countries. A small blackboard listed exchange rates. Apparently, he could use Britain's money.

Let's see…I can get ten crackers for three pounds. Wait, how much is that in yen?

It was foreign money, so he couldn't really grasp the relative values. Unable to decide if it was expensive or cheap, he inserted the money.

After putting the money inside, he grabbed a pack of ten crackers wrapped in a clear film package.

Then…

"…Huh?"

When Kamijou turned around to go back to Index, he stopped abruptly.

The free drink station wasn't the only facility in the walled section. Several others were here, like the onboard bathrooms, space for cleaning appliances, and small rooms that could preserve the in-flight meals and warm them up.

Among them was a half-opened door.

The one that had been closed a little earlier—the door to the small room for in-flight meal service prep.

…Are they supposed to leave the doors open on a plane like this?

Passenger planes were heavily slanted during takeoff and landing, and other things like turbulence could cause shaking. During a time like that, if a door was left half-open, it could cause trouble, like suddenly swinging closed and slamming fingers or breaking the door's fittings. At least, that's what he'd seen on a documentary once.

"Should I close it…?" muttered Kamijou casually, walking near it. Nobody would get mad at him if he merely closed it. Right before he grabbed the knob, though, his eyebrows twitched.

He saw something.

He saw what was on the other side of the half-opened door.

The room itself was narrow. The space was apparently for warming a lot of the in-flight meals at once, with a row of microwaves bolted onto a metal shelf rack.

That wasn't the problem.

Something dark red and goopy was stuck to those microwaves stationed along the wall. It was about fifteen centimeters across and fifty tall. After thinking for a moment, Kamijou decided someone had put a dirty hand on the wall to try to stand up.

What could the dark red stuff have been?

The room was for heating up in-flight meals, so maybe some kind of sauce or stew had spilled…

"You saw, didn't you?"

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him.

It belonged to a woman.

When Kamijou turned around, the hot blond flight attendant was standing there.

With an apologetic face, she repeated, "You saw the bloodstain,

didn't you?"

The flight attendant even told him something he didn't know.

"This is—," began Kamijou, but the next words didn't come out.

He heard a *bang!!*

It took him several seconds to realize that not only had she twisted his arm, but she'd also taken him down to the floor.

Practically straddling him now as he lay facedown, the flight attendant brought her mouth close to his ear and whispered an apology.

"(…I'm sorry. Since we can't bring weapons on board, all crew members have been trained in this sort of hand-to-hand combat in order to deal with a variety of trouble. Only through training exercises, though.)"

"Wh-what is this…?" stammered Kamijou, bewildered.

With the hand that wasn't currently twisting his arm, the flight attendant clicked a switch that was probably for a radio.

"Captain, this is urgent," she said in Japanese, her tone nothing if not extremely cold and businesslike. "One of the passengers saw the bloodstain before I could clean it. I believe he's now caught on to the situation aboard the plane. How should I proceed?"

8

The babealicious flight attendant who had Kamijou pinned down seemed to be waiting for someone to come.

The idle time continued.

Eventually, the flight attendant spoke.

"A terrorist…"

"You're a *what*?!"

"N-not me!!" denied the hot blonde hastily. "Airport control informed us that one has apparently infiltrated the plane. If we don't accept certain demands, they'll create a mechanical failure on the Skybus 365 and cause it to fail during landing—in other words, they'll bring it down in flames."

"…Seriously?"

"The bloodstain you saw was from a tour guide, a colleague of mine. He was attacked from behind suddenly, and we believe it was the terrorist's doing."

"You don't think *I'm* the criminal, do you…?" said Kamijou, a bad feeling coming over him.

The flight attendant shook her head. Though of course, he was lying on his stomach and couldn't see her face.

"No, not at all…," she said. "But we don't want this information disseminating to the other passengers. This is already a dangerous situation, and if word spread, there would be a huge panic inside the plane with nowhere for anyone to run. A lot of blood could be shed, and if worse comes to worst and the panic makes the criminal anxious…"

Her tone suggested she was at a complete loss. Maybe she told him all this because she felt indebted to him. Despite having him completely pinned with a self-defense technique, she seemed to be in the inferior position.

"What exactly do you plan to do?"

"Well…"

As she searched for words, reinforcements arrived.

Not for Kamijou, but for the flight attendant.

It was a fairly tall man. He had on a white, military-like uniform, so he was probably the pilot.

This man took one look at Kamijou's face squeezed against the floor and spoke, using Japanese.

"…We'll have to separate him from the other passengers."

"C-can we go that far? We have a duty to protect our passengers' safety, but that doesn't give us the right to put one in isolation."

It was actually the hot lady, the very person who had him pinned down, who seemed rather confused.

In contrast, the pilot wasn't shaken.

Slight bitterness crossed his face occasionally, but his feelings didn't seem to change his mind. "You think we can just tell him not to talk and send him back to his seat now? He'll make a fuss. You can be sure of it. When that happens, the whole plane will panic… You know all that. That's why you knocked him down and waited for instructions, isn't it?"

"…"

"We need him to stay here until we wrap this up. We'll give him a full refund for this flight for cooperating. If it seems like he'll make a fuss anyway, we'll have to leave it to the company's attorneys."

"H-hold on just a minute!!" interrupted Kamijou. He was pinned facedown, one arm immobilized behind him, but he cried

out anyway. “I heard there might be a terrorist on board, but if that’s true, you don’t have time to be doing this, do you?! Can you guys find the person by yourselves? The more people you have, the better, so I’ll hel—!!”

Before Kamijou could finish, the captain cut him off with a *click* of his tongue. He gave the flight attendant one close glare, then looked back at Kamijou. “…That sort of thing is exactly why we’re preventing you from moving.”

“What?”

“Listen to me. There are over five hundred people on this plane, and that’s just counting the passengers. The terrorist hiding among them has all those lives in the palm of their hand. We can’t have some amateur blabbermouth like you going wherever he damn well pleases.”

To Kamijou, it sounded like the captain was picking a fight, and he found himself angry at how the man had put it. But the captain continued with some cold words before he could say anything.

“Can you shoulder the weight of five hundred lives?”

“…?!”

“As captain, I have a responsibility to do exactly that. I will think about what it takes to guarantee the survival of this entire plane and act accordingly, even if this incident gets out and I’m fired. Offering help is something only people who are prepared can do, and I’m sure you can’t. Nor do you need to.”

The captain gave a sharp gesture for the flight attendant to move.

He wasn’t telling her to release Kamijou.

It was so she would isolate him somewhere else.

“The heating space for in-flight meals right over there is empty, isn’t it? Throw him in there. If things escalate into a nightmare, he’s welcome to blame me.”

9

The door closed, and Kamijou heard the dull sound of the lock falling into place. In the room that contained only microwaves and a bloodstain, Kamijou picked a random shelf on the rack to lean against.

After the captain left, but right before the flight attendant personally threw him into this tiny room, she’d bowed her head in

apology, saying, “I-I’m sorry. We really need to do this to avoid panic on the plane.” She’d probably figured he deserved an explanation for why this was happening to him.

He thought back to what she had said before. It seemed like her claim that a terrorist might be on board was right on the mark.

The threat letter delivered to the airline company went like this:

A structural defect existed on Skybus 365 passenger planes, tested and proven by the terrorists. Unless the master recorder for the four biggest airline companies in the United Kingdom was destroyed, they would exploit the flaw in the Skybus 365 headed from Academy City to Edinburgh and take the plane out of the sky.

“Master recorder?” he’d asked.

“It’s the computer that manages all passengers’ flight tickets, luggage tickets, and things like that,” the flight attendant had explained. “Without it, air service would come to a complete stop. It processes far too much information to do by hand.”

The exact method they were to use was apparently infecting the master recorder with a computer virus that was supplied with the threat letter.

“If we infect it with a virus while it’s connected to the network, not only will it probably destroy all the data in the master recorder; it will also apparently send all the log files after it’s destroyed to the comment sections on hugely popular blogs. If we could just analyze the log formats, we could probably send out dummy logs and make it look like the master recorder was destroyed, but apparently, the logs are encrypted to the point where decryption would take days.”

There were a lot of *apparently*s and *probably*s in there; the flight attendant didn’t appear particularly knowledgeable in this field, either.

“…What’s the structural defect?”

“We don’t know. But when we looked at the flight names in the threat letter again, they were all Skybus 365 models like this one: flight 5991 from Paris to Moscow, flight 4135 from Nice to New York, flight 7558 from Marseille to Peking…And it seems all of them experienced engine failure for about fifteen seconds during their flights. They did an investigation on each plane where they disassembled individual parts, but they couldn’t find any particular issues. The parts are still being used.”

The three planes had been dry runs for the terrorists, and this

was the real deal.

Supposedly, that was how investigative authorities had interpreted it.

"Then what about the bloodstain before?" he'd asked. "You said your colleague got attacked."

"Yes, but we don't know the terrorist's true intentions…And we don't even know what procedure they'll use for exploiting the defect. But it could have been an important part of their plan…"

Before she'd closed the door on him, Kamijou thought he saw exhaustion in her face.

"…The terrorists are after the complete closure of British air lanes…," he muttered to himself in the small, empty room.

If they accepted the demands, they'd completely destroy the master recorder. If they didn't, the Skybus 365 would crash. Either way, it would be a heavy blow to the British airline industry.

Not to mention the only land route, the Eurotunnel, was out of operation now. If everything went according to the terrorists' plans…

Does that mean they were involved with the closing of the land route, too?

Kamijou considered it for a moment, but eventually shook his head.

He had no information. An amateur wouldn't figure out the truth just by thinking about it.

That was true for his current situation, too, where he was locked in a cramped room…*They treat passengers absolutely awful, but still. It's hard to say anything when they ask if I can shoulder five hundred lives…*

The tension drained from Kamijou's shoulders. He decided to think positively: When the door opened next time, it might mean they had good news.

10

From the nose back, the Skybus 365 was split into three classes: first, business, and economy. The passenger seating was structured into two stories, forming a total of six sections.

Stairs to go between the first and second floor were in the "walled areas" separating each class. The metaphorical "wall" was actually over seven meters thick, hosting a collection of small

facilities like the onboard bathrooms and the free drink station.

A certain hatch was open in one of those areas.

A fireproof hatch leading to the cargo hold.

The cargo hold on a Skybus 365 extended below the first floor of passenger seating. There was no real reason the seating area would be connected to the hold, but if there happened to be a fire in the hold, you wouldn't otherwise be able to extinguish it; you'd just be waiting to crash. That was why an emergency hatch was prepared, but…

"…"

The man stood in front of the hatch at a loss.

A soft mechanical *beep* prevented his action.

He had a key card in his hand.

A key card he'd only gotten after purposely attacking a flight attendant from behind.

…*Damn it.*

He put the key card in the reader again, then swiped it down.

But like before, he heard the *beep* rejecting him.

Damn it all. I can't do anything if this won't open…

The man let out something akin to a moan.

In his hand was a black cell phone. All the "required programs" were entered into it. He was supposed to prepare for the terrorist attack: If he hooked a cable to the phone's bottom connector and sent the "required programs" into the Skybus 365, it would exploit the structural defect.

The place where he was originally supposed to do that was an empty seat in economy class. An ally had reserved a seat under a false name, but the spiky-haired Asian had taken it when they released the seat to people on the wait list.

He could have used force to make him vacate the seat, but if he was too violent, he'd turn a good one hundred passengers against him.

That method was useless now.

Instead, he was trying to move forward with plan B, since plan A hadn't gone the way they'd hoped. But he absolutely needed to get this hatch open for it to work.

Shit, shit, shit!! I should have known a flight attendant wouldn't have the security clearance to open this hatch. But all the operators with more clearance are in the cockpit. If I could fight my way in there, we wouldn't have been so roundabout and threatened to exploit this

structural defect in the first place…

The man cast a baleful glance toward the walled area's exit—the economy class passageway. If only that spiky-haired Asian wasn't there, he wouldn't have had to get so conspicuous and attack that flight attendant…

Damn it. Just having to use that thing in the cargo hold means I'm in a lot of trouble! Things would have gone a lot more smoothly if only that seat was empty…!!

"…Huh?" the man muttered suddenly.

He was gone.

The spiky-haired Asian who had been sitting in the seat in question was gone. Maybe he was using the bathroom. Plus, the silver-haired, green-eyed girl who seemed to be his companion was out of her seat, wandering around the passageway.

This was his chance.

His last chance to gain control of the Skybus 365 without having to use that thing stored away in the cargo hold.

He took a glove out of his pocket. If he went down the passageway, he'd run into the silver-haired girl. A better idea seemed to be to use the stairs to change floors, find another set of stairs to access the opposite passageway, then get close to the seat he needed.

11

Touma Kamijou hadn't come back.

Index, waiting for both the boy and the crackers he had to pay for, eventually lost to her hunger and stood up.

She had decided to go look for him.

He could be hogging all the food to himself, after all.

…That's what she thought anyway, but her search ran into early complications. Kamijou had walked straight down the passage and gone past the walled area. It wasn't very far, but for some reason, she couldn't find him anywhere.

"?"

Tilting her head in confusion, Index returned the way she'd come.

Then something else stopped her again.

Someone was sitting in Touma Kamijou's seat.

It was a fair-complexioned man in a plainly colored suit.

Probably in his early twenties. Average height. He had a big French-language newspaper open in front of him, which hid the lower part of his face, so she couldn't make out many features.

Index wondered if he'd sat down in the wrong seat by mistake.

But she had perfect memory; it couldn't have been her misremembering it.

So, without hesitation, she sat down in her seat and said to the man next to her with the newspaper, "That's Touma's seat."

The newspaper man's shoulders twitched in surprise at her voice.

She looked at him again to see that he had the newspaper open in one hand. His other hand wasn't holding it. She followed his arm down behind the newspaper; his hand was holding a blackish cellular phone. On his knee, which was also blocked by the newspaper, were little pieces. Maybe they were phone parts…A slender cable of some sort, and what looked like a nail clipper…

<"…Damn. Why can't you wait a hundred twenty seconds?"> he muttered in French.

Index looked at him blankly, and before she could say anything, he moved.

He folded the spread newspaper and placed it on his knee, then turned to her and casually reached out with a hand.

There was something in it.

Something sharp pressed against her side, hidden in a way that prevented the other passengers from seeing.

<"Airport security mainly goes for metal detection,"> said the man in French. <"You'd be surprised at what they don't see—the simple truth that even a knife whittled from animal bone can still pierce organs and slice veins.">

For now, the man had stopped the witness from taking action.

…This is the worst. I mess up on the very first thing, and now absolutely nothing is going according to plan!!

From the man's perspective, it was almost checkmate.

If the girl frozen next to him yelled, it was all over. He could kill her, but if he did that, he'd turn at least all one hundred of the economy-class passengers into enemies. When that happened, they wouldn't act out of a sense of justice—they would panic, and the panic would engulf everyone. One little blade wasn't going to do

anything about that.

"…What are you doing?" asked the girl next to him.

He didn't have a responsibility to answer, but he spoke anyway, in a voice that sounded like he was talking to himself. "Injecting a program. It uses a cell phone's data transmission function to interfere with forced-landing safety mechanisms."

"Forest landing?" said the girl with a frown.

Ignoring her, the man reached to the window side of his seat… right below the window. He drew out a piece of rolled-up wire, then fed it into a gap in the wall and moved it to the side. It was like he was using cutters on the wall; a straight line formed in it.

The man dug his fingernails into the line, then pulled. A lid came open like a car's dashboard. On the other side were at least twenty kinds of cable.

"If they accept the demands, I won't have to use this. That's right. It's not like I'm doing this because I want to—"

He stopped midsentence.

The cable coming out of his phone's lower connector was supposed to hook into the maintenance cable inside the plane's wall, but it wasn't working. There was a slight crack in the connector he needed to use.

There was only the *clatter-clatter-clatter-clatter* of plastic against plastic grating on his nerves. His brow creased, and he began to swear under his breath periodically. But no matter how many times he tried, he got the same result.

The cable wouldn't connect. He couldn't inject the program.

"Oh, that's the thing Touma—," began the girl next to him, but he wasn't listening.

<"Shit!!"> he shouted in French, prompting a glance from the passengers nearby. He slammed the lid on the wall closed. Then, his bone knife still against the girl next to him, he looked up at the ceiling without a word.

What now?

He couldn't insert the program from the economy-class seat. Their "bargaining" that depended on the structural defect couldn't continue now.

He knew it. This method wasn't going to work.

…This is awful. Half the reason we're doing this is out the window now. The only other thing I can do…I don't want to, but I'll have to rely on that thing…!!

After thinking that far, the man pulled himself together.

He couldn't depend on the economy-class seat anymore. Which meant he'd just have to find a way to pry open the hatch to the cargo hold. Using what little time he had left, he had to get his hands on a key card with more security clearance than the flight attendant's.

And he had another problem.

The girl sitting next to him, completely stiff.

If he let her go, she'd warn everyone about him. He needed to shut her up for good.

He had no choice.

He gulped loudly, then put the tools and cell phone on his knee into his pocket. Finally, he hid the blade in his French-language newspaper and said to the girl, "Stand up. If you disobey, I'll stab you."

The plan was starting to fall apart.

Even the mastermind himself wouldn't be able to control the situation for much longer.

12

Next to a wall lined with microwaves in the in-flight-meal heating space, Kamijou suddenly lifted his head.

…Footsteps?

Suddenly, from the other side of the door, he heard what sounded like footsteps.

Not just one set.

It was at least two.

Wondering who it could be, his ears picked up on something else.

It was a high-pitched whistling sound.

…Is that Index?

If he remembered right, when Index was angry earlier (because no matter how long she waited, it wasn't mealtime), the hot blond flight attendant had given her a cheap ball-shaped toy. Apparently some sort of prize, it made a flutelike sound when you gripped it.

It didn't sound like she was spontaneously squeezing it. The sound was regular. It was probably in her pocket rubbing against her, making noise on its own.

If that toy was an airline-points reward, then it might not have

been Index carrying it…but he couldn't help imagining her, wearing her simple dress.

If it really was Index, who was she with? Maybe she'd caught the flight attendant.

But then a different thought occurred to him.

One that threw cold water over his optimistic opinion.

Wait, he thought.

Was the truth really something so kind?

There was plenty of danger.

Why had they thrown Touma Kamijou in here in the first place?

No, that couldn't possibly…

He tried to deny it, but then the two sets of footsteps stopped.

The whistling flute noise stopped, too.

He heard a door open.

This area was walled off. The other passengers wouldn't see them.

And then…

<"Inside. If you don't want to be stabbed.">

The voice spoke French, so Kamijou didn't know what was said. But the deep male voice certainly didn't sound anything like what most people would expect of a tour guide who worked in the service industry.

Screw that!!

Kamijou was about to shout and break out, but if he made too much noise without being able to break the door down, it would just antagonize the criminal.

The door didn't seem to be made of metal, but it also didn't seem the sort he could break just by tackling it. He didn't think he could use a wire to undo the electronic lock, either.

While he was considering his options, there was movement on the other side of the door.

The one doing the threatening and the one being threatened seemed to have just entered another small room right nearby.

Shit!!

Kamijou cast a quick glance around. His eyes fell on the aluminum cart they used to carry the in-flight meals. It was like a squared-off stroller.

He violently grabbed the cart's handle and pointed it at the

door.

The thought of having to compensate for the damage didn't even have time to cross his mind.

"Oooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He shouted and charged with all his might.

Then came the collision.

With a brilliant crashing noise, the aluminum cart's front crumpled inward. But the door didn't make it out unscathed, either. The lock mechanism bounced off with a *click*, and the door flew ajar like someone had kicked it open. The remaining momentum sent both Kamijou and the broken cart rolling out into the passageway.

He released the cart and looked around.

There were several small rooms in this walled area, but only one door was closed.

He grabbed the knob and flung it open.

It was the closet where they kept cleaning supplies. There were several mops and plastic buckets inside.

As well as a familiar face.

Index.

She was lying there, faceup, as a man he didn't recognize straddled her. The man's hands held a rubber hose from the closet, and the hose was wrapped around Index's slender neck.

What was he doing?

Before Kamijou could think, his hands moved.

"?"

The man strangling Index must have been engrossed in the act, because he didn't notice the danger until the moment Kamijou grabbed the back of his collar.

With the man's suit in his grip, Kamijou wheeled himself around.

The man's body, under the influence of centrifugal force, flew out of the cleaning supply closet. Before he touched the floor, he crashed into the far wall.

There was a thundering *slam!!*

Oxygen left the man's lungs. His body slumped and crumpled onto the floor.

Kamijou ignored him.

He didn't notice the scream he unleashed as he swung one of his legs up, then drove it toward the man's sternum, trying to break his bones.

This time, his attack was dodged. The man had moved, rolling to the side.

The inner walls were thin, probably to decrease the plane's weight. The sole of Kamijou's foot ended up buried in the wall.

The man took the chance to bring his arm up and around.

Kamijou felt something hot near the back of his thigh.

He turned to see a knife made out of carved bone in the man's hand—probably to get through the metal detectors.

"…"

Kamijou didn't clench his fist.

Instead, he pulled out the aluminum handle bar from the broken in-flight meal cart that was stopped on its side in the passage.

If he landed a hit with it, it would be no laughing matter for the victim, but Kamijou didn't care.

With the blunt weapon now in Kamijou's hand, the man was the one to edge carefully away.

And then Kamijou began to hear the pattering of footsteps.

The flight attendants had noticed the terrorist—or rather, they'd heard Kamijou smashing through the door.

That seemed to decide the man's next course of action.

He put the blade in his inside pocket, then escaped via the nearby steep staircase to a separate floor. Kamijou considered chasing him, but in the end looked toward Index, lying limp in the cleaning supply closet.

"Index!!" he shouted right next to her ear. The girl shifted a little. There was still a dark blue bruise on her neck, but it didn't seem like her life was in danger.

Her small mouth moved slightly.

"What? Forced-landing safety mechanism…?"

A stream of unfamiliar terms flowed from it.

Ones he wouldn't think the mechanically challenged Index would say.

That was when reinforcements finally arrived.

The flight attendant and the tall man…probably the plane's captain. He must have been prioritizing the terrorist on board, leaving the plane's controls to his copilot.

They looked disapprovingly at the broken door to the in-flight-meal heating space, but when they saw the limp Index and the gash in Kamijou's thigh, they realized he hadn't done it for nothing.

After explaining what had just happened, he asked, “What did she mean by ‘forced-landing safety mechanism’? Index probably heard it from the criminal.”

The captain exhaled slowly, then answered. “Do you know what a belly landing is?” he began. “I’m sure you’ve seen it on the news sometimes. When you can’t get the wheels out during landing and the plane makes all those sparks on the runway. Do you know why that’s dangerous?”

“Well…because the sparks could ignite the fuel tanks or something?”

“The plane’s fuel tanks are inside the main wings. The fuselage hitting the asphalt won’t normally set them on fire.”

“Then what?”

“It’s the engines. You know, the ones hanging underneath the main wings. The Skybus 365 model is designed so that the engines won’t come into contact with the ground during a belly landing, but a whole lot of vibrations still make it to them. The jet fuel inside a spinning engine is already easy to burn, but when it reacts with the air, it basically becomes a bomb waiting to go off. If any unstable vibrations hit it, the entire thing could explode. If the fire in the engines goes through the fuel pipes and into the main wing tanks, that’s when the whole thing’ll blow.”

Kamijou couldn’t take this all in; the captain explained it to him piece by piece.

“That’s why the Skybus 365 has a forced-landing safety mechanism. Sensors will automatically detect the impact from a forced landing and shut down all the engines on its own. It seals up the fuel pipes, preventing fire in the engines from igniting the fuel in the tanks. After that, the plane scrapes along the runway with pure momentum, decelerating…That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

“It automatically stops all the engines…?” The bad feeling Kamijou felt deep in his heart escaped through his mouth. “Then if that safety malfunctioned right now…”

Everyone was silent.

The captain groaned softly, then said, “I understand the gist of it. I know that your friend was hurt, too. It’s unfortunate we couldn’t be there to help, but…”

“(Yeah? What do you ‘understand,’ exactly?)” Kamijou remarked to himself.

The captain, not noticing, continued, “Most importantly, this

didn't escalate. But we can't let anyone else know that both a tour guide and a passenger have been harmed. If they knew, all five hundred of them would create a huge panic as they sought 'safety.'"

His calm tone aggravated Kamijou even more.

He didn't appreciate how no matter what happened, the captain treated it like it had nothing to do with his decisions but was still trying to decide everything on his own.

"I apologize to the both of you, but we'll still need to isolate you temporarily somewhere else. I have a duty to the lives of my passengers. For that, I'll do anything—"

Before he knew what was happening, Kamijou's right hand moved.

Once he started to swing his fist, he remembered his hand still had the aluminum bar in it.

But he couldn't stop now.

Thud!! came the sound.

The captain's body reeled over backward.

"…Don't give me that shit," growled Kamijou. "A duty to the lives of your passengers? I listened and did what you assholes told me to do, and look what happened! Do you even understand the situation we're in?! You talk like you're so freaking important, and you're not even sorry that you messed up! What's that about?!"

"Ugh…"

As the captain, holding his nose, tried to say something, Kamijou shoved the blunt weapon at him again.

"That guy just hurt my friend!! You say you have a responsibility to five hundred people, but you let one slip through the cracks awfully quick!! Treating people differently because of how they come up on some documentation, are you? What do I have to gain by protecting complete strangers like you with your stupid job rules?! I have every reason to beat the hell out of that shithead. You can do whatever you want! And I'm going to do things my way!!"

Kamijou looked once at Index, who was being cared for by the hottie flight attendant, then tossed his blunt weapon aside.

…Damn it. If I'd been prepared…

Then he started off in the direction of the steep staircase where the man in the suit had disappeared.

"…That piece of shit. I'll beat him senseless."

The violent tone wasn't the sort Kamijou usually had.

And Kamijou wasn't the only one acting differently from usual.

"…That hurts," grumbled the captain, who'd been struck by the weapon. He rubbed his nose where he'd been whacked, checking to see if it was broken.

He glared after Kamijou, then slowly put a hand up to the wall and took a microphone from it. It was the one flight attendants used to tell all the passengers to buckle their seat belts or call the cockpit directly to ask for instructions.

The captain adjusted the channel so only the cockpit would hear him, then spoke in a low voice.

"Wash…" That was the name of one of his two copilot subordinates. "You can leave the plane's controls to Richmond. Yes, yeah. It's an emergency. You unlock the box and bring the Archery here."

The hottie flight attendant blinked at him, dumbstruck.

The Archery was the only weapon on board the Skybus 365, stored in the cockpit so that nobody could steal the flight yoke. In consideration of Japan's Swords and Firearms Control Law, it was categorized as a type of crossbow, but in reality, it had none of the structure or function of a bow and arrow. When you pulled the trigger, nitrogen gas would propel a metal dart over forty centimeters long at a high speed—a weapon almost on the level of a hunting gun.

When he saw the flight attendant's dumbfounded look, the captain snorted. "He won't listen to any orders. He raised his hands against the captain, too. I hereby designate him as a dangerous individual. We essentially have another terrorist on board. I'm not about to let someone unpredictable have his way on my plane."

His voice was chilling to those who listened.

The Archery arrived quickly.

13

When Kamijou arrived on another floor via the stairs, he looked around. The post-sunset plane interior was illuminated by soft lights, but the walled section he was in seemed somewhat dimmer.

The man in the suit wasn't here.

In front of him was the business-class seating and behind him, economy.

In both areas, the passengers were spending their time in their own ways, unfolding newspapers, putting on their seat-connected headphones, and fiddling with their small monitors.

…Which one? Which way did he go?

For now, he decided to move from the walled area to the economy-class seating behind him. He was pretty sure he remembered the features of Index's attacker, but every single one of these people was sitting politely and quietly in their seats. They all started to look camouflaged.

Kamijou didn't have perfect recall like Index.

He'd finally gotten a look at the man's face—but at this rate, his mental image of it would probably get jumbled up.

If he'd only act panicked, I could tell him apart right away…, he thought bitterly. But then he stopped dead.

The criminal had been negotiating with the British over the destruction of the master recorder or whatever. That would constrain him from taking any major action until it was clear what the response would be.

For example—

Making the final decision of whether the plane would or wouldn't fall.

I get it. Kamijou nodded to himself, then turned back to the walled area. *I know how to shake him up.*

Fweeee!! A shrill buzz rang in the man's ears.

He was actually in the other direction from economy, where Kamijou had headed—in business class, sitting with an incredibly natural posture. There was nowhere to run on a plane. The most effective way to throw off pursuers was to blend in with the other passengers.

And now this buzzing. It felt like it was piercing his chest.

It must have been for emergencies, because all the seats began to operate on their own, letting out clear oxygen inhalation masks all at once. The passengers looked at them blankly for a moment and then, as though their hair had caught on fire, began to panic.

What the hell? What's going on here?!

The man gripped his seat's armrests and looked around.

If the oxygen masks are out, the plane isn't doing well…But I still haven't injected the required program. I don't remember gaining control over the forced-landing safety mechanisms!!

Meanwhile, the shrill buzz continued.

The other passengers nearby were rioting, making him feel like the plane itself was rocking unnaturally.

What if…

What if, hypothetically, something irregular had happened and the plane had malfunctioned somehow…?

Not good.

His objective—no, the objective of the terrorist organization he was a part of—was to destroy the master recorder for the four major airline companies in the United Kingdom. They hadn't gotten any response from the UK yet. If the Skybus 365 were to fall victim to a completely unrelated accident that caused it to plummet and crash, then…

The master recorder was still live.

Wait, if they treated the whole thing as a simple airplane accident, the entire terrorist incident would disappear.

Not good, not good, not good! Shit, I need to do something!!

The man stood from his seat.

He had to fix this state of affairs. But he didn't have any real plan as to how.

Meanwhile, the captain was furious.

Having gotten his hands on the Archery, the only projectile weapon on his plane, he scowled at the shrill buzzing and grabbed a microphone hanging on the wall.

The line was a direct connection to the cockpit.

"What's happening?! You didn't suddenly decrease our altitude, I hope!!"

"N-no, sir. The craft is level. The instruments didn't cause an automatic alarm; a manual switch inside the plane activated it."

"Shit! Damn terrorists!!" shouted the captain, Archery in hand. The actual terrorist was one thing—he didn't even perceive Touma Kamijou as a normal passenger anymore. "If they plan on having their way on my plane, then they've got another think coming… Hey, Richmond!! Cut the alarm, damn it! We know the instruments

are fine, so play the automatic voice clip! The one saying it was a mistake and there are no problems!!"

After shouting into the microphone, he slammed it to the floor and hefted the Archery again. That Asian kid used the stairs to go to the other floor. But no matter how big the Skybus 365 was, it was still a passenger plane. If he combed the whole thing, the captain would find him quickly.

"Damn it. I'll stop those little bastards even if I have to shoot their limbs off," he spat, about to hurry to the staircase.

Then, from the microphone-slash-speaker he'd thrown to the floor came his copilot's stressed voice.

"C-Captain!! Emergency!!"

The mic was meant to be close to the face to talk through it. He'd heard it from the floor—proof his copilot was shouting his head off, not caring.

"What is it? Did they do something else?!"

"*I'm not sure, sir!*" the copilot said, returning shout for shout. "*A-anyway, please come back to the cockpit! I can't do this alone… Damn it, what's going on? What the hell is all this? Th-the fuel gauge…!! It's not supposed to be going down like this! There must be a hole in the tank!!*"

"Are you kidding me…?"

The captain felt a cold tension begin to whirl like a vortex in a spot near his gut.

Just hitting the onboard buzzer wouldn't have caused such a change. Or had something happened related to the forced-landing safety mechanism…?

…What's happening?

Both hands still clutching the Archery, which could kill an unarmed foe in a single shot, the captain vacillated over whether to chase the terrorists or return to the cockpit.

"Captain, your orders?! We won't hold until the airport! Worst-case scenario, we have to prepare for a forced landing on a highway!!"

"Damn it all!!"

The captain made up his mind.

Instead of heading up the steep staircase, he went with his other copilot, who had brought him the Archery, and ran full speed toward the cockpit.

14

The London borough of Lambeth was home to a church named St. George's Cathedral.

St. George was a household name; many different facilities took it, including schools, hospitals, parks, and churches. There were even multiple St. George's Cathedrals in London. This was one such building.

When thinking of a church at night, most people would probably envision the moonlight colored by flickering candles and stained-glass windows creating a cold, solemn atmosphere. This was a day when that rule didn't apply. A plethora of monitors provided by groups cooperating with Academy City, headquarters of the science side, sat atop the podiums and pews, with square, boxy communication devices and all kinds of coiling cables lying on the ground. The light from the liquid-crystal displays and pilot lights threw the soft darkness in the nighttime cathedral into chaos.

As a large group of sisters traveled to and fro, none of them quite sure how to operate the unfamiliar machines, two figures sat on chairs.

One of them was the head of the Puritan Faction—the archbishop Laura Stuart.

The other was the head of the Knight Faction—the Knight Leader.

In contrast to Laura's gentle expression, the leader of the Knights' was stern.

"'Twould seem the head of the Royal Family Faction won't be coming. One would think it sets a bad example for the three factions not to come together for negotiations."

"…The royals, starting with Her Majesty the Queen, control many related agencies such as the police and the Parliament. They're doing their utmost to have them act appropriately. They've no time to come to a place like this."

Laura exhaled at those words.

The three factions of the United Kingdom had a clear relationship of power.

The Royal Family Faction knew how to handle the Knight Faction.

The Knight Faction knew how to handle the Puritan Faction.

The Puritan Faction knew how to handle the Royal Family Faction.

Therefore, by having a representative from each present at a conference, they could all state their opinions as equals…but the Royal Family Faction's absence made several things more difficult for the Puritans' Laura. It was enough for her to curse the queen, thinking, *I do hope that irritating woman didn't run away from this on purpose.*

Without noticing Laura's concerns, the Knight Leader spoke, tone steadfast.

"…In any case, it seems *that illusion the lot of you planted* is starting to show its effects."

"Heh-heh. I will admit that it is indeed too difficult to completely hijack a hunk of science such as a passenger plane from a distance. Falsifying a single instrument, however, is really quite simple."

"In other words, you messed with the fuel gauge in the cockpit," he replied, looking at the computer set up in the cathedral.

There were several LCD monitors and instruments surrounding the two chairs. It was a training simulator, the same as the Skybus 365 cockpit. She seemed to be using it to "aim" her illusion spell.

"There should be much consternation on board about now. After all, their gauge is plummeting so fast, they must think there's a hole in the tank. They will believe they won't make it to an airport."

"Instead of landing at an airport, you'll have them do a forced landing on a countryside road with few buildings." The Knight Leader moved his eyebrows in displeasure. "The report did say the terrorist himself won't crash the plane right away, but I'm sure he doesn't understand the plane's defect they've started the rumor about. Forced landings are very difficult. If anything were to get in the way, it would make a big mess."

"Oh-ho. Would you rather have it explode in a big city, in a residential area, on the international airport runway, or near the control tower? If worse comes to worst, I should think the victim count would be many times the number of passengers aboard."

"…"

The Knight Leader fell silent for a moment, growling.

Laura grabbed one of the sisters who was walking over with a

report and asked, “What roads might they use for a forced landing?”

“Of the straight roads from London to Scotland, the best would likely be in the vicinity of Kendal and Carlisle.”

After hearing the report, Laura snapped her fingers.

The Knight Leader frowned. “…Some kind of signal?”

“Shut down all main roads that correspond to that area and block all the roads that lead there. Also, full equipment for suppressing the terrorist. I believe the Knight Faction has the Robin Hood for sniping, yes?”

“A schemer falsely preaching religion would dare to order a knight who protects an entire nation?”

“Please think of it as us letting thee have all the credit. By the reports, our terrorist is no sorcerer and doth show no sign of possessing a gun or explosives. If the craft lands safely, he would not be able to contain over five hundred passengers. I’m extending to thee a splendid gift—a chance to farm some experience points.”

“Ridiculous,” spat the Knight Leader. “I don’t mind hurrying things along, but what do you plan to do if the plane breaks up in midair?”

“If that happens, we must at least secure the Index of Prohibited Books, who is on board with them. Oh, come now. I have the spell I used to capture Lidvia Lorenzetti when she attempted to flee using a charter flight. Even should it explode in midair, *if it’s just one person*, I can catch them on the ground.”

“I say this from the bottom of my heart: You deserve an untimely death.”

15

The man felt the plane bank sharply.

The nose was tilted down—in other words, the plane would decrease altitude rapidly.

A forced landing? Not good!!

The man’s goal was the destruction of the master recorder. If they landed somewhere before the UK decided whether to accept that demand or not, their “negotiations” would be unable to continue.

And traditionally, a passenger plane landing somewhere other than an airport meant he’d be surrounded by a lot of law

enforcement agencies and end up in a siege. He'd heard a rumor that aircraft windows and walls weren't only light and thin to decrease its weight and solve the problem of high gas prices—it was also so that people could use large rifles to accurately snipe passengers on the inside.

British airports and main roads were right in the middle of enemy territory. He couldn't afford to land somewhere like that and get trapped in a stalemate.

"Shit!!"

The man sprang into a run. From the business class forward… He thought of going through first class and battering his way into the cockpit, but he stopped halfway there. The cockpit door would be the most sturdily constructed of all, as a way to prevent terrorism. It wasn't something he could break through without a plan.

Meanwhile, the plane continued its downward race.

He began to feel an odd weightlessness, the kind you get when riding an elevator.

"I have to do something…anything…," he muttered to himself, jumping into the walled area between business and first class. Like in the other walled areas, a mic for the flight attendants was hanging on the wall.

He took it.

His trembling hand changed the channel on it, and when he got it to connect directly to the cockpit, the first thing he shouted was this, in French:

<"Call off the forced landing!! I'll bring this plane down right now!!>"

"?!" He heard a gasp from the other end.

They probably couldn't figure out how to respond to the sudden threat.

Without thinking, the man continued, "I have control of the Skybus 365's structural defect. I can bring this plane down at any time! If you don't want over five hundred passengers to be killed, bring us back to our original altitude right now!!"

That was a complete bluff. The seat in economy class had been unusable, and he couldn't even open the hatch connecting to the cargo hold for the backup plan. But that didn't stop him from lying.

"We can't."

Despite his bluff, he got an unexpected answer. The voice was

tense, but still replied clearly.

"For whatever reason, the fuel gauge numbers are plummeting. We're probably leaking fuel. At this rate, we won't make it to the airport in Edinburgh. And we can't turn around and go to one in London, either! In fact, if things go wrong, the fuel could catch fire and make the engines themselves explode!!"

None of that mattered.

Whether or not the plane blew up didn't change anything for the man.

What was important to him was to grace this act of terrorism with a beautiful ending.

"Argh. I'll kill you. Three minutes, got it? If you don't return us to normal altitude in three minutes, I'll start killing the passengers one by one!!"

"Do you understand the situation?!"

The answer was close to a shriek, but the man covered it up with an even more deranged voice. "Do *you* understand?! I hold the passengers' lives in my hands!! I have over five hundred hostages. I could kill half of them and still have more than enough in stock! Don't forget that!!"

After saying everything he wanted, the man slammed the mic back onto the wall.

Then he slid down the wall and sat on the floor.

He reached for the animal bone knife in his inside pocket.

Would they ascend, or would they descend?

His teeth chattering, the man gave his full focus to the plane's angle.

16

In a corner of St. George's Cathedral, the archbishop Laura Stuart frowned.

"…How odd this is."

"What?"

The answer came from the Knight Leader.

Laura looked not at the monitors but at the whiteboard next to them. Several round magnets were stuck onto a map of the United Kingdom, but one of them was traveling along it.

"Our plane is ascending. I must assume they're giving up on their forced landing."

“You didn’t order the illusion disabled?”

“Oh, no,” mumbled Laura, as if talking to herself. “I would never disengage the illusion before they landed on a main road. Nevertheless, the remote illusion we placed on said craft has lost its effect. Which is—”

“Archbishop! It’s an emergency!!”

Just then, a young sister from the Puritan Faction ran over to her.

“We confirmed large-scale interference from Scotland. Our illusion is being nullified by a third party!! The fuel meter display should be back to normal now!!”

“Interference, you say…?”

For the first time, Laura’s brow furrowed in distaste.

Who? And for what purpose…?

This was, of course, magical interference. But they also knew the terrorist in question was a mere felon and unrelated to sorcery. It didn’t seem plausible that there were any sorcerers working with the criminals.

In fact…

“Scotland…Of all things, for the interference to come from within the United Kingdom…”

The Knight Leader’s expression changed, becoming easier to understand than Laura’s.

It was anger.

“Either French sorcerers have gotten involved without us realizing it, or a British sorcerer’s society has turned coats. We don’t know. But this is your fault, Archbishop. You were given absolute authority over the English Puritan Church to avoid any trouble like this before it happened.”

“…I understand that.”

And though it didn’t show on her face, her emotions were actually in a state of violent turbulence. Then, with one of those emotions in her voice, she said:

“There’s more to this incident than a delinquent or two who liketh things flashy.”

Laura snapped her fingers.



The next thing anyone knew, there was an orange point of light directly behind her. It was a flame, lit on the end of a cigarette. A sorcerer with a cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth. Laura spoke to him.

"Just in case, make the preparations we discussed for the Skybus 365. What will you need?"

"Let's see," said the red-haired priest quietly, blowing out a puff of smoke. "I'll need a transport. The Knight Faction presides over military matters; can I get their leader to contact the RAF?"

17

The man looked up.

The plane's angle had changed. In contrast to just before, the nose was going up.

It was gaining altitude again.

The forced landing…was avoided?

Breathing heavily, he looked around.

The shrill buzzer had cut off, as though the cockpit had done something about it. An automatic announcement began to play in the languages of several countries, informing them that it was a mistake and there was no need to worry.

Somehow…I made it.

In the walled area between business and first class, the man finally relaxed. The terrorist plan was basically at a dead end, but it wasn't a decisive failure yet. If he could just figure out how to open the hatch connecting to the cargo hold, there was a solid chance to recover.

But then…

"So this is where you were."

With a startled expression, he looked to where the voice had come from.

The spiky-haired Asian was standing in the entrance to business class.

Touma Kamijou didn't actually understand much of the situation.

He'd been the one who pressed the emergency buzzer, but after that, he hadn't felt the plane's rapid descent. At most, he wondered if the crew was up to something.

In any case, he'd caused a panic in the plane and shaken up the criminal, then looked around here and there, watching to see if anyone had an irregular reaction.

And he'd found one.

The walled area between business and first class.

A man who had grabbed a mic and yelled through it at the cockpit.

"…"

For a few seconds, the man looked at Kamijou, dumbfounded.

Then he reached for his inside pocket.

His bone knife was likely inside.

The knife that the metal detectors couldn't find, sharpened to a neat angle that could sever veins and pierce organs.

That was why Kamijou moved before the man pulled his hand back out.

With a *bam*, his feet hit the floor in a quick dash to close range. Then he rammed his palm into the man's elbow, bent as it was to pull the knife out.

When he saw the way his arm jerked back, the man winced.

Without caring if the man understood Japanese, Kamijou said to him, "You want to get stabbed with your own knife?"

"?!"

The man, now in a cold sweat, tried to whirl his body around to shake off Kamijou's arm. But before he could, Kamijou pulled his head back, then slammed it hard into the man's forehead.

There was an ear-splitting *wham!!*

The man staggered.

Then Kamijou let loose a fierce knee to close the newfound distance.

It was a direct hit, and the man's body floated, his gut at the center. As his target thumped back down onto the floor, Kamijou moved in for a counterattack, but…

"…"

His opponent's hand reached for that suit pocket again.

And as it did, he smiled thinly.

<"No complaints, I'm sure.">

Kamijou didn't understand the French, but he could tell the enemy was boasting about imminent victory.

With Kamijou unable to move, the man whipped out the knife and pointed it at him.

No matter how you thought about it, between bare hands and a blade, the blade had the advantage. In the worst case, if Kamijou went in prepared for them to hit each other, the other guy would get away with a punch—Kamijou's gut would be split open and he'd die.

…That's how it should have been.

But the bone knife in question had made contact with Kamijou's knee before, so it was broken from the base.

"…Are you kidding me?"

The man glared balefully at his knife, now only a grip.

Then his face came back up abruptly.

Touma Kamijou, fist clenched like a boulder, was slowly moving toward him.

He spoke.

He knew the man probably wouldn't understand, but he spoke in Japanese anyway.

"No complaints, I'm sure."

Bam, wham, crack!! A series of noises as his fist swung down again and again.

For once, Touma Kamijou wasn't satisfied with a single hit.

18

The male terrorist was personally tied up and left in a small room in the walled area between business and first class.

The rapid decrease of the fuel gauge seemed to have been a mistake on the crew's part, and there was no real problem. (Still, the captain was awfully unhappy and didn't appear to want to talk to Kamijou. This was something he'd heard from the hot blond flight attendant.) They weren't going to crash anymore; they'd gained altitude and were headed to Edinburgh Airport as originally planned.

Kamijou was worried about Index, who'd been throttled by the man, but in her words:

"*Beef-or-fish, beef-or-fish!* Once the problem is fixed, all that's left is to eat the aerialplane meal!!"

"…Index, you were held at knifepoint and have a bruise on your throat where he squeezed it. But you're acting like the world is totally at peace."

All things considered, everything was supposedly going smoothly.

But…

"…"

"What's wrong, Touma?"

Something didn't sit right with him. It felt unnatural, like he'd been fitting all the pieces into a jigsaw puzzle but lost the ones he needed to finish the picture.

"Come to think of it, why would he pick now to commit a terrorist attack?"

"Well, he seems to be with an anti-UK group," said the flight attendant, while giving him a skeptical glance. Maybe she didn't want Kamijou, a passenger, moving around more than he already had. "I suppose they wanted to cause a problem with the skies over the country."

But Kamijou was still confused. "It just seemed like he was scared of us doing a forced landing in Britain or the negotiations being called off before the time limit…If he'd just done things right away, he could have given himself more time for negotiating. Then the criminals probably could have done all kinds of bad stuff and maybe even shaken up Britain."

"Either way, the terrorist is gone now. We don't need to worry about it, right?" said Index. "More importantly, *beef-or-fish*!!" she shouted.

The flight attendant comforted her with a smile.

*Am I overthinking it…? It's possible the pilot could have made us land at an airport along the way if the terrorist hijacked the plane immediately. Still…*Kamijou thought about it, walking slowly. *But if he needed to act at the right time, then why? If all they wanted to do was send a threat letter to a British airline company and have them destroy the master recorder, they wouldn't need to involve the skies over Britain. No matter where the plane crashed, the end result would still be that a flight to Britain got attacked.*

And the terrorists themselves couldn't have thought up some slipshod plan on the spot. They'd actually shut down the engines on other flights for fifteen seconds, testing to make sure they could use the forced-landing safety mechanism properly.

They would have done simulation upon simulation, planning so that they could handle any possible situation. Would the whole thing be over just because they couldn't use the forced-landing safety mechanism?

Was there something else?

Wasn't there a backup plan they could have used as insurance?

*…A reason the terrorist moved in the final hour of a ten-hour flight…*Had something out of the ordinary happened in the meantime?

That's right. We stopped at an airport in Paris on the way to load in extra cargo!!

That's when Kamijou stood perfectly still. When Index and the flight attendant gave him dubious looks, he said, "There's more."

"?"

"The cargo hold!! He waited until we were finished loading cargo at the airport in Paris to carry out the terrorist act. Why was that? Because he was waiting for his friends to get into the Skybus 365 via the cargo!!"

Index and the flight attendant looked shocked.

"Normal passengers can't bring weapons onto an airplane. That's why his friends hid inside the containers to board the Skybus 365. If a problem came up and they couldn't do plan A, they'd have the man open the hatch from the outside, which is the only way it can open, and move to plan B."

"Then the reason he was quiet for almost nine hours and didn't attack at all was to join his allies in France…? Is that why he started moving after the containers were loaded?"

"If this is true, we're still in trouble," said Kamijou, tap-tapping a foot on the floor. "They got into the cargo hold without going through normal checks. They wouldn't have been patted down. It's more than likely the enemies in the cargo hold are armed with guns and explosives. And if they realize the plan has failed, they might use their firepower to bring the entire plane down, themselves included."

The jumbo jet was flying ten thousand meters in the sky. The air was thin, for one thing. Too thin for a person to breathe. The air

inside the plane was artificially pressure-adjusted to make it easy for people to spend time there. It was just like putting air into a balloon.

Bullets would easily punch airholes in that balloon—the plane's fuselage. It would be all over if that happened. The air inside the plane would move all at once to escape outside it, resulting in that tiny hole folding inside, seriously damaging the plane itself.

"…Is that the only entrance to the cargo hold?" he asked.

"Y-yes, but you need a copilot or higher key card to unlock it," answered the flight attendant with a rather uncertain expression, as though she wasn't an expert on cargo.

"A key card…I don't think I can exactly ask our captain for help at this point."

The captain had a projectile weapon called the Archery, but he wasn't likely to lend it to them. Kamijou had recovered his good name after taking the terrorist down, but it didn't look like that had changed the captain's personal feelings.

Then the flight attendant offered, "…Maybe not the captain, but if you ask the copilot, you might be able to get the key card."

"…Really?"

"Not the Archery, of course, but still," said the flight attendant apologetically. For Kamijou, though, he would be grateful just to open the cargo hold hatch. "Also, the Skybus 365's cargo hold is separated into three blocks," she continued. "Most of the cargo we loaded in France is in the center block, I believe."

Which meant the terrorists were most likely there.

But if there was only one entrance…"…The most dangerous part would be the instant we open the hatch."

"B-but there are no other exits…," stammered the flight attendant.

"That's right," he said. "Can we use the ventilation ducts?"

"No, this isn't a movie. The ducts in the Skybus 365 are only thirty square centimeters in diameter. It wouldn't be possible for a person to go through them…"

"Actually, that's fine."

"?"

"What do you mean, Touma?"

The flight attendant and Index gave him surprised looks. "There are coffee and tea bottles in the free drink station, right?" he said. "Bring some here. If they're cold, could you warm them up for me

again? Use the microwaves or whatever you have to. I just want something ridiculously hot."

19

Several box-shaped containers were lined up inside the cargo hold. They weren't the long, slender type that you'd see loaded on tankers in a port, though. They were cubical, like dice, two meters to a side. Made not of metal but of lighter aluminum. They sported the airline company's logo on their silvery surfaces.

The door of one of those containers was open. And standing against the wall of that open container was a single man.

Acre Lugoni.

Although he wore the work uniform of a Paris international airport, his hand gripped the latest model of pistol. The bag at his feet was also packed with explosives like hand grenades and plastic bombs. Of course, he'd only be using them in the absolute worst-case scenario.

If possible, he'd rather not use this armory of weapons.

When Acre and the others were moved to this project, they'd actually gotten all kinds of support from several organizations in the form of information and hideouts. The condition was that those organizations needed to assist Acre in hijacking a passenger plane—where it was naturally difficult to bring firearms—without using any real weapons. If they were successful, Acre promised to share his knowledge with those organizations.

Thus, if Acre and his comrades failed at this new kind of terrorist attack that took advantage of the plane's forced-landing safety mechanism, they'd turn into laughingstocks.

But there was no sign that their first option was going to succeed.

The negotiations using the Skybus 365 had probably failed. The United Kingdom likely wouldn't answer their demands—they wouldn't do any damage at this rate.

Their second option—in other words, the worst-case scenario—was fast approaching.

…*Guess it's time.*

In the dimly lit cargo hold, Acre glanced at the wristwatch on his thick arm. He calculated they'd arrive at Edinburgh Airport soon, but there was no sign of his comrade Musset making a move;

he should still be in the passenger seating area. Had he lost his nerve? Messed something up? Either way, Acre didn't get the feeling things were proceeding according to plan.

At the very least, he'd bring down this plane.

He might be able to blow open the hatch using his explosives, but he decided against such a roundabout method.

He made up his mind: five more minutes. If there was no movement, he'd deliver an attack to the cargo hold's wall. If he blew a hole open in the outer wall, he just had to wait for the force of air to destroy the Skybus 365 on its own. They'd be laughingstocks later for the half-assed result, but it was better than getting nothing done at all.

That's when it happened.

He heard a *ba-klong*. It sounded like something denting a metal sheet. Not only once, either—the sound came a second time, then a third.

Acre searched for the source of the noise, then eventually directed his gaze up.

That was where he heard the metal sound from. Strung all about the ceiling were ducts. Their metal surfaces were twisting out of shape. Not just in one place—but as though something was moving through them, little by little.

…Are they serious? Is this supposed to be a surprise attack…?

You saw it all the time in movies, but…The ducts in the Skybus 365 were far too small for a human to pass through them and too thin. He'd admit that going straight through the single entrance to the hold would be suicidal, but wouldn't getting yourself stuck in the tiny ducts and becoming unable to move be just as idiotic?

Acre pointed his gun overhead.

The *ba-klong* came once again.

He took careful aim, then fired several shots into the one point where the metal sheet had bent.

Bang bang bang!! A series of gunshots.

The walls of the ducts were awfully thin—maybe high oil prices had steeply increased fuel costs, too. Then, from the easily made, fingertip-sized hole came hot fluid.

And it was *hot*.

But it was too hot to be human blood.

"What?!"

The pain stung him like a deluge of sulfuric acid. He identified

the thin vermilion liquid from its smell. It was black tea. Even now, steam rose from the stream of liquid dripping down.

And Acre hadn't noticed something.

Having timed his entrance to cover the sound of the hatch opening and closing with the gunshots, Kamijou had dived straight through the front door and into the cargo hold.

"Yo, terrorist. Ever heard of thermal expansion?"

The volume of an object changes when it heats up. A simple example is the crackling noise when you dump hot water down a stainless-steel sink. In order to draw Acre's attention, Kamijou had sent black tea through the duct.

"!!" Without hesitation, Acre pointed his gun at the voice speaking to him.

But before he could fire, Kamijou had already hurled an entire bucket of liquid at him, almost like he was dousing a bonfire in water.

Instead, the bucket contained steaming hot coffee.

It doesn't need to be explained what would happen if you had that dumped on your head.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He howled and writhed as Kamijou tossed the bucket aside and laughed. He gave the handgun Acre had dropped a light kick out of the way. It sank into a puddle of burning hot coffee.

But Acre didn't stop there.

Screaming, he grabbed Kamijou by the collar with both hands and lifted him up. A moment after the sensation of his feet being in the air gave him a chill, Acre slammed him down to the floor. *Da-pam!!* The impact shot through Kamijou's back, and air escaped his lips. *"Grgh…brgh…?!"*

He couldn't breathe, but Acre didn't do the polite thing and give him time to cough. Instead, his arm went behind his waist and came back out with a rather large knife.

"!!"

As the knife swung straight down at his face, Kamijou forced his head to move. There was a shrill *gachee* from right next to his ear. It looked like half the knife had broken when it stabbed the floor, but Acre, not caring, went to bring it down a second time.

Kamijou reached for the floor.

He grabbed the broken part of the blade and, as Acre leaned forward, stabbed it into his thigh.

The man let loose a scream.

As Acre buckled and staggered to one side, Kamijou rolled to the other, trying to somehow put distance between them.

But he quickly realized the attempt had failed.

The puddle of coffee was right next to the kneeling Acre. And in the middle of the still-steaming puddle was the handgun Kamijou had just kicked into it.

Acre wasted no time grabbing it.

Handguns were made with many different materials, but the one Acre had was stainless steel. It was, of course, a good conductor of heat. After being in the boiling coffee like that, it should have felt like a burning coal, but Acre gripped it tightly anyway. The only thing on his face was rage.

"…I am bringing down this plane," said Acre, burned all over his body, purposely speaking in Japanese because Kamijou had spoken to him in it. "The Eurotunnel explosion did major damage to our great France. They're going to pay an equal price. They'll lose their air lanes in addition to their land route…!!"

"There's not even any proof Britain did that!"

There were a lot of containers around. Some of their contents might have been usable as weapons. But Acre wasn't about to give him the time to open them up and check.

"Besides, it's an island nation! Why would they destroy their only land route?! They'd only be hurting themselves. And they're having all sorts of trouble now, aren't they?!"

"That's not necessarily true," said Acre, the scorching handgun practically fused to the surface of his palm. "The Eurotunnel has been canceled midconstruction before because of military or political issues. It's an important land route between France and the UK, but there are still people who haven't admitted how effective it is to block it off."

"…"

"We decided to jointly oversee the Eurotunnel's construction as proof that we'd joined hands in friendship. And yet they were selfish and ruined what we had going!!"

"…Do you have any proof of that?" Kamijou spoke carefully. "Is there really a reason to fight over whose fault it was?! I heard about what's stored in the containers on this plane from a flight attendant. It's all liquid food for people who can't eat normal stuff. French food companies made it to send to the people in Britain!! I thought

that was the relationship between your two countries. You think everyone else in the world will go along with your bullshit conspiracy theories?!"

"You're right—maybe not all British citizens are in the wrong. But there are idiots wherever you go. I'm not going to let those idiots off the hook just because you say there are good people among them."

As Acre spoke, his finger tensed on the trigger. For some reason, he was smiling hysterically.

"Either way, you're dying here. It's not something you have to worry about."

"…Can you even shoot that thing? It was covered in hot coffee."

"Recent handguns, even soaked thirty percent in mud, can fire. Don't think the bullet won't come out just because it's wet. Japanese people don't know anything about guns, do they?" he said, freely pulling the trigger.

Kamijou automatically wanted to shut his eyes, but he barely managed to suppress the urge.

Then…

He heard a *grrkk* sound.

Nothing else happened—no bullet flew from the muzzle.

The safety wasn't on or anything. Nor was he out of bullets.

He pulled the trigger a second time, then a third. And then, as he stood there dumbfounded, Kamijou clenched his right hand into a fist.

Then he spoke.

"Ever heard of thermal expansion?"

"?!"

Not waiting for a reply, Kamijou's fist flew. *Wham!!* A dull feeling traveled from Acre's face down, dispersing throughout his whole body. But he still didn't fall. Kamijou clenched his left fist, too.

"Same as the duct before. An object's volume changes when it heats up!"

His left fist flew.

Acre, punched in the face, reeled backward.

"Gun parts work the same way! Soak them in boiling water, and

one or two of them are sure to bend out of shape!!"

Kamijou loosed his right fist again, and this time, it took Acre down.

He exhaled.

Guns worked by causing the gunpowder inside to burst, and the small blast of air shot the bullet. Since firing one or two hundred shots in a row could cause guns to heat up, they were made to resist a certain amount of heat. That also meant the parts of the gun that wouldn't normally heat up could be a weak point.

…Still, it was basically a gamble whether or not it would really malfunction like I'd hoped. Don't know whether it was lucky or unlucky…Actually, I was unlucky the moment I ran into terrorists here.

Whatever the case, as long as a third person didn't show up to rush him down, the Skybus 365 was free from danger for the moment.

At last, he relaxed.

And then he heard rustling.

Kamijou turned to face it.

Acre, who he'd already punched down, was quietly trying to get up. And there was a bag at his feet. His hand was rummaging around in it—and then it came out. With a hand grenade.

"…!!"

Kamijou hurried to grab Acre's arm, but Acre's movement was faster. He grinned an incredible grin as his other hand reached for the grenade's pin.

It would detonate before much longer.

The cargo hold was small, with nowhere for Kamijou to run. And even though it was made for killing people, the grenade would surely do damage to the Skybus 365's outer wall. If that came to pass, it would all be over. This passenger plane would crash.

And then—

"As much of an amateur as always, I see. Your hesitation to kill is putting everyone else in danger."

Kamijou heard a voice.

A man's voice—one he knew.

Acre frowned at the strange situation, but that didn't stop him

from moving his hand to pull the pin out of the grenade.

That was when…

20

The noise was the first thing the captain, gripping the flight yoke in the cockpit, noticed. He gave the radar a dubious look, spotted a small point where it shouldn't have been, then looked out the window and gave a start.

A transport craft, giant and jet-black, had flown up right next to them, as though it was a stealth plane.

They weren't even ten meters apart. It was positioned as though they were doing a midair refueling, but that was an art only small fighter jets were permitted to attempt. Two eighty-meter-class jumbo jets flying within this distance was far beyond simple acrobatics. It was basically suicidal.

As she walked down the passageway of business class, the hottie flight attendant looked out the window and was shocked. A transport craft had its rear hatch open, and something was scattering out of it. It was like a high-altitude blizzard of paper dancing through the air, and even though she didn't know what it was, she innocently thought of it as pretty.

Index, who was waiting in front of the hatch to the cargo hold for Kamijou to return, noticed people near her start to make noise and glanced out the window. What she saw astounded her. The knowledge in the 103,000 grimoires she possessed had identified the dancing paper blizzard as runic cards.

And then…

In the cargo hold, on the wall right next to Acre, something strange happened.

Whumm!!

Something orange in color spurted from the wall. It was a sword. A single sword, made of flames, penetrating the plane's outer wall to arrive inside it.

The flame sword burned Acre's clothes but didn't destroy his body.

Then the one who had created the flame sword, not caring

whether the result was ethical, pulled it back out.

It happened a moment later.

Roar!! The air whipped up into a storm.

All the air in the cargo hold started to move toward the hole near Acre.

Acre, of course, was the first one to suffer harm.

His body shot toward the wall like a door slamming shut. His gut was being sucked through the hole in the aircraft. The jumbo jet, the Skybus 365, which would normally have been torn apart from the inside out, barely avoided destruction by a lid named Acre closing on the hole.

However…

"Gggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

Acre screamed as he felt his body expand under the constant force of suction.

The flesh around his gut was literally being torn off.

Kamijou watched the absurd situation, eyes wide, and then heard the flame sorcerer's voice.

"It's ten minutes to Edinburgh Airport. I think he'll probably survive until then…And I must say, you've somehow been entrusted with 'her' management tasks, so I'd prefer it if you demonstrated at least this much resolve."

After saying everything he wanted, his voice suddenly disappeared like a radio transmission ending.

Kamijou stood dumbfounded for a few moments, then realized the hand grenade was still in the screaming Acre's hand. Practically foaming from the mouth now, he was desperately trying to pull the pin.

Kamijou knocked it away with a hand. The grenade bounced far away so easily it was almost funny.

With Acre's last means of resistance lost, Kamijou, forcing him back, grinned and said, "Do your best."

21

The mastermind saw the news on the television later.

Despite the Skybus 365, which had landed at Edinburgh Airport in Scotland, being in a dangerous situation for a time, the

passengers had worked together to resolve the problem safely. While watching the cheerful news, the mastermind looked over various documents.

What was on their mind was the transport plane.

The Royal Air Force had lent out a transport craft to resolve the incident.

And it was a stealth transport with an extremely small effective-radar cross-section, too—tech borrowed from Academy City.

The mastermind couldn't help but sigh.

They decided that the United Kingdom was at its limit.

They were disappointed at the state of affairs, where the UK had needed to borrow strength and technology from Academy City to solve a problem of this level. They couldn't become a truly strong nation like this—at least, not by leaving the reins with people who would borrow the strength of others to fight.

The mastermind turned off the TV, then scrupulously put the documents together and neatened them, thinking, *It looks like we will have to do something after all.*

INTERLUDE TWO

Yo.

Looks like you saved me a second time.

That's right. I thought I'd safely defected from the area under Russian Catholic control. The Roman Orthodox Church and the Russian Catholic Church joined forces, right? Thanks to that, those Russian hands have reached all the way to France, which should have been under Roman Orthodox control. Anyway, all things considered, I was in quite the pinch. This old body of mine would rather stay away from such tales of escape.

I went through all that work reforming the group and changing its name, and thanks to you, the Astrologers' Brigade is now quite famous.

This time, I think you'll let me thank you. Last time…Well, we were all desperate at the time, but you disappeared without saying anything, so I still quite regret not being able to thank you.

Oh, I know. Just say the word and we will come to your aid.

Anything you need? …A weapon, eh?

I must say, I can't help but wonder how on earth you lost your own weapon…But I suppose it would be best not to ask. Oh, don't glare at me. I can imagine how terrible that episode must have been.

Still, we have plenty of good weapons in store. I didn't vanish from Russia's confines and travel the world freely for nothing. We've laid hands on all sorts of tools, from all ages and countries, acquired them and made deals for them. We even have the rare, ridiculously large article you like so much in stock.

We'll give you a few, so feel free to test them out.

The weapons will break? Listen here. I'm repaying a debt to you. I obviously wouldn't give you fragile weapons. They're the real

things—I guarantee it. They don't just leave their names in history—they *make* history.

…No, hold on a moment. If I made such an awful claim about them and they broke first thing, we'd lose face. Come over here a moment. I'll lead you to where our true, top-of-the-line, number one weapon is.

Eh? No, I am not putting on airs. I can't carry it to you by myself. I could use construction machinery to do it, but it would be faster just to bring you to it.

Over here, now.

Yes, it's in this carrier. Let's just undo the rope and pull the cloth off.

How do you like it?

I know I'm bragging, but it's amazing, isn't it?

The holy sword Ascalon.

Ha-ha. Don't give me that dubious look. I get it, all right? There is no such holy sword named in real legends. This is a Soul Arm made by a true sorcerer based on the story penned by a certain sixteenth-century author who took some liberties. The sorcerer considered what the theoretical values of the sword would be if an evil dragon fifty feet long actually existed and the sword were to slay it. It's a bona fide monster of a weapon.

It's a 3.5-meter, 200-kilogram hunk of steel.

This author wrote that it was a one-handed fauchion, but when he calculated what the holy dragon-killing sword would need to look like, it ended up being stupidly large.

Go on, take it. There's no one more fit to hold it than you.

I must say, you have it tough, too, don't you?

The fact that you saved our old Astrologers' Brigade was nothing but happenstance. These eyes of mine saw it the moment you requested that we procure weapons, when you never planned on contacting us again—you're in quite a hurry to make battle preparations.

Well, you're headed off to battle no matter what I say, I'm sure. I won't stop you. But before you leave, there's one thing I wanted to give you. A certain craftsman living in Britain left it with me. Seems he's the same as me—he couldn't easily forget you after you up and disappeared so suddenly. You apparently told him to burn the sketch, but that old man completed it in secret anyway.

Ha-ha, what's wrong?

One look at the thing and you grimace at it?

A lot has happened, but originally *you* were the one who requested the craftsman make that escutcheon, weren't you?

CHAPTER 3

Sorcerer's Society of the British Labyrinth

N∴L∴

1

All told, they soon landed at Edinburgh Airport.

Edinburgh was the name of a city in Scotland, the northern region of the United Kingdom. London was in the south, so in order to get to an airport there, they now needed to transfer to another flight, this one domestic.

"There's a lot of TV cameras around, huh? I guess because of the terrorist attack."

After using a smattering of English to get past customs, Kamijou looked at his cell phone to check the current time.

"Huh? Oh wait, do I have to adjust it for the time difference?"

There was probably a function that would let him instantly switch to the time of any major city in the world, but unfortunately, Kamijou wasn't one for reading thick cell phone instruction manuals. He put it back in his pocket, then looked around and spotted a clock on the wall.

"…Eight at night…I hope we're not too close to the last flight…," muttered Kamijou, also not very knowledgeable about airplanes.

Then…

"…Tou—*rumble*—ma—*rumble*…"

"Eek?! I-Index!! I'm hearing a beast's growl in between the letters of my name—what's that about?!"

"It's because I'm so hungry. I'm so hungry I'm starving, so much I could fall over right now!! All that *beef-or-fish* stuff didn't happen and I never got to eat anything! Any more and I'll die!! I have to eat something or I'll really die!!"

Index, still in her dress rather than her habit (it may have been

a domestic flight, but they probably wouldn't let her on board covered in safety pins anyway), flung her arms all over the place in a desperate appeal.

Kamijou sat against his suitcase, folded his arms, and groaned. "Maybe they serve food on domestic flights, too?"

"I don't think they do!! I don't have any proof, but I don't think this one will, either!!"

…She had a point. As far as Kamijou could tell from the domestic flight schedule, flights from Edinburgh to London took less than an hour. They might not prepare any food for them.

He thought about it with another groan. "I can't do it. I'm too hungry. Let's go eat something."

"Toooouuuuummaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

"You're so happy it's scaring me!! My eyes are full of stars! I've never seen you make such a glorious smile!!"

As their exchange continued, Kamijou took Index and began to wander around, looking for a food court in the airport. He'd started learning a little English with a phone app, but it was still far from usable. He could still use the symbols of knives, forks, and coffee cups to find his way through the vast airport, though.

…I think there was some British money in the stuff Tsuchimikado gave me. I think we can use a little now. It's a necessary expense, right?

"T-Touma! I smell coffee coming from over there!!"

"What? I don't smell anyth— *What?!* There really is a café around the corner!!"

Where Kamijou looked, he saw a rather stylish coffee shop, its walls made entirely of glass panes…One might expect a more well-traveled person to complain about going to a chain store they could find in Japan after having come all the way to the United Kingdom, but as an average lower-middle-class citizen (who did his best to resolve a terrorist incident), Kamijou was about to jump for joy at the sight of any food at all.

That he was acting like Index was not to be uttered. And speaking of her…

"☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆!!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!! Index, those aren't even words anymore!! Those incredible eyes! Incredible eyebrows! Incredible mouth! All in all, an incredible smiling face!!"

Kamijou found his determination once again—he would just have to go into the café as soon as possible, then cram a ham and

lettuce sandwich or something into his mouth. Taking Index by the hand, he headed for the entrance.

That's when it happened.

All of a sudden, someone tapped on his shoulder from behind.

When he turned around, he saw a woman there. She looked about eighteen. Despite her Asian features, she was taller than average. Her long black hair was in a ponytail, and even bundled up, it still reached down to her waist. Her clothing consisted of a pair of jeans with one pant leg cut completely off and a T-shirt tied up to expose her navel. On top of that, she wore a jacket that, like the pants, had one sleeve cut off to expose the arm…And even more striking than her distinctive outfit was the absurdly large Japanese katana, the Seven Heavens Sword, hanging at her waist like a holstered gun from a western film and stealing the entire show.

Her lips moved. "(It's been a while,)" she said.

When Kamijou heard her, he responded with:

"Wh-what is the erotic fallen-angel maid doing in a place like this…?!"

Upon hearing his voice, the katana girl Kaori Kanzaki abruptly began to have a coughing fit. As it worsened to the point where she was having trouble breathing, she inhaled deeply—half measured breath and half a pure gasp for air—then desperately started to speak.

"I…I was requested by the British royal family to lead you and Index to a royal family residence in London: Buckingham Palace. And I wouldn't have needed to if you'd actually taken the direct flight on the supersonic plane Academy City prepared for you…"

"Well, that's not a good reason. What's the particular need for it to be the erotic fallen-angel maid who shows up in this situation…?!"

"I am not erotic, nor a fallen angel, nor a maid!! I—I may have done…certain things in order to repay you after the fight with Acqua. I admit that. But you took one look at me and called me an erotic fallen-angel maid! How do you explain that?!"

"I couldn't help it!! You were actually an erotic maid and you looked a lot like a fallen angel!!"

"Stop recalling all the specifics and going crazy about it!! A-and stop your face from turning so red!!"

Kanzaki grabbed Kamijou's shoulders and shook them back and forth, but for some reason, it seemed like Kamijou was the one who couldn't look *her* in the eye.

"A-anyway!! I am not nearly that indecent right now! I've come to welcome you two as a servant of the English Puritan Church and the Priestess of the reborn Amakusa-Style Crossist Church, and I'm not embarrassed about it!!"

"That sounds like a pain in the ass to begin with, and besides, why are you wandering around an airport with a katana hanging from your hip?! What are you here for anyway?! Whenever two or three sorcery people get together, it's never for anything good!! Explain this to poor Mr. Kamijou!!"

Kamijou and Kanzaki argued loudly.

At that point, Index said, "Tooouuumaaa…"

Her eyes weren't on the nearby Kamijou or Kanzaki. She was gazing at the stylish café in question.

"…If you make me wait any longer, I won't forgive you."

"What?! It's *my* fault?! I disagree! I don't think the terrorist on the plane or Kanzaki talking to me were my fault!!"

None of his excuses reached Index, whose hunger was controlling her. *Yikes, I need to cut this conversation with Kanzaki off right now and get her to come inside the café with us*, thought Kamijou, beginning to calculate his next moves.

"Y-yes, well. Ahem. We should hurry. The time is approaching," said the erotic maid, aka Kaori Kanzaki.

Ohhh, she gets it!! I love it when a girl can read the mood!! Wait, it doesn't change the fact that I'm actually starving, too!! Kamijou thought, deeply impressed. But when he turned toward the café, meaning to get there immediately, Kanzaki continued:

"Because of the earlier terrorist attack, all passenger flights will be grounded temporarily for reinspection. I have a helicopter and pilot waiting, so we'll use that to get to London."

……

Kamijou was silent for a few moments. Then he looked at Kanzaki.

"…What's going on?"

"The original plan was to go straight to London on Academy City's supersonic jet, right? You got onto a different plane right

away, which means we're seven hours behind schedule. We don't have a moment to waste. It was an official order from the United Kingdom to summon the Index of Prohibited Books here. As the one entrusted with her guardianship, we need you to act accordingly… By the way, she'll have to change into her habit, the Walking Church. We have a space set up in the backseat of the helicopter for her to change."

"…What about food?"

"Do you think there's time to eat? Come, we're going. I say, this wouldn't have been a problem if we were the only ones you were making wait, but it's a different story when it involves everyone in the royal family. To think you'd be seven hours late for an appointment with a royal family member…The Royal Family Faction is one thing, but when I think about what those hard-headed Knights would do, it sends shivers up my spine…"

As she continued muttering completely unintelligibly, she forcefully dragged Kamijou by the hand and started to walk. What followed was the most crucial thing, from his point of view, that he needed to tell her:

"I repeat for the sake of those who weren't around: But what about food?! Index has been at her limit for a while now!! At this rate, I have a bad feeling all that angry energy coming from her empty stomach is going to burst!!"

"Administrative tasks regarding her are your territory. You do something about it."

"You're acting like it's only my problem…!! You're just mad, aren't you? You, yes *you*, the young lady there—you're a little mad I was making fun of you for being an erotic fallen-angel maid, aren't you?!"

"No, not at all. I am calm and composed—perfectly so, I might add—so let's get to the helicopter quickly."

Using the strength of a saint, less than twenty of which existed in the world, Kanzaki gripped Kamijou's arm and kept moving.

2

The third princess of England, Vilian, stood in a large room.

It was about half the size of a tennis court, and it was Vilian's territory. Frankly speaking, it was her private chamber. Trickery and wiles were everywhere for the royal family, both inside and

outside the country—and even in their own residence. But this was a safe place, one where she could shut everything out and be alone.

"…I see. Yes—yes. Either way, I'm happy to hear the plane has landed safely at Edinburgh Airport."

Vilian held an antique phone receiver whose surface was made of ceramic. She was actually going through a top-of-the-line telephone switchboard in Buckingham Palace. She didn't know any details about the technology, except for how calls seemed to be heavily encrypted for security.

She was talking to the one in charge at Edinburgh Airport.

And the thing she was worried about at present was the cargo on the plane.

"Yes. I'm sure you'll be investigating several things, since a terrorist incident has just occurred…But please, distribute the liquid food to the appropriate households as swiftly as you are able. It is quite literally a matter of life and death for those who cannot eat normal food products…Yes. Please set their minds at ease as soon as you can."

Vilian slowly hung up the receiver and exhaled a little.

To be honest, there was a chance she was being listened to by an intelligence agency (regardless of the presence of encryption), but she hadn't said anything she wouldn't want overheard.

The United Kingdom was a complex nation.

It had four cultures: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

It had three factions: the Royal Family, the Knights, and the Puritans.

These two groupings intertwined to create the political body called the United Kingdom. In some cases, English knights would quarrel with Scottish knights, whereas someone from Wales might have ties to both the Royal Family Faction and the Puritan Faction.

As the third princess, Vilian of course belonged to the Royal Family Faction. This had been determined the moment she was born into it. The only people who could become part of the Royal Family Faction anyway were those born into the king's bloodline or those with enough political skills to serve as their aides. It was numbered as one of the three factions representing the country, but in terms of sheer population, it was vastly smaller than the Knights or the Puritans.

The Royal Family Faction's role was to influence and control

parliamentary politics as the ones who truly steered the country. They didn't act from the shadows like the Knights and the Puritans; because they could influence the police and military as well, one could call their strength the most conspicuous of the three.

Still, Vilian, the third princess, didn't have much authority in particular.

The three daughters of the queen of England were described thusly, from oldest to youngest:

The eldest was the brains.

The middle was the military brawn.

The youngest was the virtuous.

…In other words, while she had a certain degree of popularity, Vilian didn't have a trump card strong enough to affect the nation. Even the man she'd just been talking to over the phone, the one in charge of Edinburgh Airport—he may have thought her a kind princess for being so considerate, but the thought would never make him decide to swear fealty to her and serve her for the rest of his life.

Her virtuousness wasn't linked to the expansion of her faction.

As her older sisters put it, Vilian's continued efforts were nothing if not pointless.

In public, she was brought up in the media as "the face of the royal family," and in some pop culture magazines the "princess you'd most want to marry…" But when it came down to it, that was her only role as part of the British royal family.

She dangled the lure of political marriage—which she had no intention of carrying out—to throw prominent figures in other countries off their game. Then the queen and her two older sisters would take advantage of that and enter into treaties beneficial for the United Kingdom.

She was very much conducting public affairs with the etiquette and modest behavior of a royal family member, but she considered her job akin to something like working as a psychological stripper. And when a crisis Britain couldn't avoid came to their doorstep, she knew they'd probably force her into a strategic marriage for real.

"…" In the large room, Vilian heaved a sigh.

The altercation between Britain and France that had sprung up lately—it was enough to make her envision her worst-case trump card.

Then, as if to interrupt her thoughts, there came a soft knock at

the door.

"____Your Royal Majesty."

The voice on the other side of the thick door belonged to one of her young servants. She was of common origin and unacquainted with sorcery. There was a special job in the British royal family called a Guards Maid, a priestess-like role that required caring for holy objects granted to the king in accordance with the tradition of the king being appointed by God and having some of His power. Vilian, however, purposely employed maids who came from common origins.

"____The leaders of the Knights and the Puritans, as well as our young guests visiting Britain from Japan's Academy City, have arrived in the palace. The audience will begin soon. You should prepare, ma'am."

"…I understand," she answered, but there was nothing more for her to prepare at this point. Actually, Vilian never changed out of the bare minimum clothing required for her public duties, even in her own room. Her entire life was accompanied by a sort of constant tension.

She walked across the large room, opened the door, and exited. Right next to the door, though not in a position to impede her progress through the hall, stood a woman wearing a green-colored maid uniform. The servant nodded, and Vilian followed her down the hallway before abruptly stopping and looking overhead.

The hallway was straight and very, very long—and the ceiling was high as well. Emblems in the shape of shields lined the walls to her sides at even intervals like the lights in a tunnel.

They were the emblems of previous generations' knights.

There was a similar hallway in Windsor Castle, another residence of the royal family's, but the ones in Buckingham Palace were emblems of the Knight Faction in their capacity as a faction based around sorcery. Having your family's coat of arms decorate this hallway was the first step to becoming an "elite" and was said to be the aspiration of all who took up the blade for Britain.

Because coats of arms were originally developed in order to tell people apart on the battlefield, each emblem was extremely individual—almost to the point of disturbing the space's harmony. But there was one thing that made the hallway seem incongruent more than anything else.

A blank space.

Amid the escutcheons hung at even intervals was one spot that remained unadorned. It gave Vilian an intense feeling of wrongness, like she was looking at a comb with a missing tooth.

She knew why this blank spot was here.

One man had fought on behalf of Britain, had his merits recognized, and was supposed to have become a knight. But he left the nation to serve as a mercenary instead, and the head of the Knight Faction had left a spot empty as a sign of respect.

As she gazed at that blank spot, her lips moved in spite of her.

"…William…"

The servant beside her said nothing.

3

The helicopter Kamijou and the others had boarded landed in an enormous London park…or so Kamijou thought, but apparently these were the grounds of a residence called Buckingham Palace, where the queen of Britain lived. It was actually linked to two adjacent parks, leaving an entire area of England's capital wide open—but, well, you couldn't blame him for the misunderstanding.

He normally would have breathed hard, deeply moved by the sheer scale, but he didn't honestly care about that at the moment. He was being visited by a situation far more important.

Which was…

"Touma…Fooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooood!!"

"*Higagyaaaaaaaaaaaahhh?!* This isn't just biting anymore; it's reached a different dimension—now you're starting to chew on me! Index, nooo!!"

Climbing up Kamijou's back was a silver-haired, green-eyed monster making its terrifying intentions known (who had, yes, changed into her habit in the helicopter).

Kaori Kanzaki glanced at them as she got out of the aircraft first. "…To think a headwind would have made us late to arrive. I've failed us all. Let's hurry—everyone should already be here."

"Wait!! You don't have anything to say about the tragedy you're witnessing?! Something like *Well, maybe you can have a sandwich*?! Index is way beyond hungry—she's gonna turn into a different creature in a minute!!"

"Feh, the Index of Prohibited Books is your territory. I'm relieved to see you're handling her so perfectly."

"I knew it—you *are* mad! You're mad because of the maid stuff, aren't you?! But you're the one who burst into the hospital room dressed like that in the first pla— *Aaawwwwww!!*"

The reason Kamijou's sentence went haywire was because Kanzaki had put a hand over his mouth.

"(…You're not allowed to talk about that when the pilot or anyone else is around. Understand?)"

"Mgghghbreakinggghghghsaintghghgahhghgtoostrong?!"

Kanzaki—quietly walking out of the square that could, on paper, also be used as a heliport—began to drag the mumbling Kamijou and headed for Buckingham Palace. Index was latched onto his back, making them look like very strange companions for Kanzaki indeed.

Kanzaki was attempting to enter the building using not the huge gate out front but a small so-called back door.

But right before she grabbed the doorknob, Kamijou opened his mouth.

"Wait a minute, Kanzaki, just a minute!!"

"What is it? It looks like your face is being grabbed like a volleyball."

"You're one to talk—you're the one grabbing it! Also, is it actually okay for poor old Kamijou to go into this palace?! My right hand has a power called Imagine Breaker in it! I'm not gonna start breaking all the national treasures in sight as soon as we step inside, am I? I don't want an unlucky, compensation-ridden life!!"

"…What, that was all?" Kanzaki eventually took her hand from Kamijou's face. "Everything is fine on that end. Although Britain is a magically advanced nation, all security features of that sort have been removed from Buckingham Palace."

"Wait, really? Doesn't the queen live here or something? I thought for sure the place would be some crazy magic fortress."

"There is indeed such a citadel. The main example being Windsor Castle, one of the royal family's other homes." Kanzaki exhaled lightly. "Buckingham Palace is used for talks with other countries. If they put any sorcery mechanisms in without thinking, it would be like drawing important foreign VIPs into a trap, which would cause diplomatic issues. Public parties are sometimes held at Windsor Castle as well, but invitations are only given to those who trust the queen to not lead them into a trap. What I mean is: Physical objects aren't the only dangerous things around."

Kanzaki looked from Kamijou to Index, who was still latched onto his head. “Besides…,” she began.

“?”

“This particular queen probably doesn’t need security like that.”

After muttering that cryptic remark, the young woman opened the back door.

The door itself was small, but the scenery expanding beyond it was nothing to scoff at. Just the fact you could use the word *scenery* to describe the room hinted as to the sheer scale of the place.

Since they called it a palace, Kamijou had thought it would be a sparkling, shiny world for the nouveau riche, but it wasn’t like that at all. The hallways were as wide as a small room; the carpets seemed like you were supposed to look at them rather than walk on them; and paintings and sculptures adorned the walls here and there. In fact, there was even a maid carrying some kind of tea set. Though the place was anything but ordinary, it didn’t sparkle, either. It was more like a museum.

“You’ve arrived.”

As he was busy feeling overwhelmed by the scenery and the maid and everything else, a man’s voice reached Kamijou’s ears—in Japanese. A man in a suit approached them, but his was not the shabby kind of suit from one too many packed train rides. No, it was the kind you wore to flaunt your status at a party…

To be frank, Kamijou didn’t think he’d ever have anything to do with a suit like that.

As soon as Kanzaki saw him, she spoke. “Knight Leader, thank you for providing a transportation solution.”

“The helicopter? No need to worry. It was a necessary expense for us as well.”

The blond man she called Knight Leader then turned his gaze to Kamijou. “Hmm,” he said. “Are you the one tasked with the Index of Prohibited Books’ administration?”

“Uh, huh? I don’t know if I’d call it administration, but…”

“I was quite interested in what sort of person preserved those 103,000 volumes…To think you would be administering it by letting it hang from your head like that. The secret arts of Asia continue to astonish.”

“It’s weird, right?! And I’ll tell you the cause of this irregular nightmare: We’re battling empty stomachs right now!! If it’s all right with you, could we get some bread for her before she actually

shatters my head with her teeth?!"

Kanzaki tried to glare at him to warn him to be more respectful, but the Knight Leader raised a hand to stop her. Then he stopped the maid holding the tea set—to have her give Kamijou and Index a kind of food called a scone, which was something between bread and a cookie.

"Hm…Hmm?! What is this? I-it's melting in my mouth! It's like it's slowly melting in my stomach!"

"I see. That's good. Now then, everyone else is gathered, so if you'll follow me—"

"Wait, is this free? Are these all free?! Now that I know that, there's no holding back. Index! Give it everything you've got!!" "I didn't plan to show any mercy to begin with!! Scones, scones!!" "That's right, Index, get 'em!! Eat 'em all!!"

"…Ahem. Things are proceeding as we speak, so we should go soon—"

"Putting butter on it really levels up the taste!!" "The blueberry jam is good, too!!" "But I'll eat it without anything on it!! I want to fully enjoy the taste of the ingredients!!" "Then I'll take all the butter and the blueberry and strawberry jam and the honey!!" "No, that isn't what I meant at all, you stupid freaking sister!!" "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!" "Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!" "This is great!!"

The Knight Leader fell silent for a moment. Then, looking down, he eventually said, "I'm drawing my sword. Do you mind?"

"No, I can persuade them to stop myself!! I'll do something, so you just stay there!!" cried Kanzaki, flustered, punching Kamijou down and putting Index in an arm lock. The maid beat a hasty retreat, putting an end to their scone heaven for now.

4

As they walked down the huge hallways of Buckingham Palace, Kamijou suddenly said, "So why did we get called here anyway?"

"…Tsuchimikado is your guide in Academy City. He didn't tell you anything, right…?" asked Kanzaki, a little taken aback.

Kamijou's head bobbed up and down. "He hit us with some weird gas all of a sudden and left us in the airport."

"That…That…" Despite herself, Kanzaki closed her eyes and clenched her teeth.

Kamijou was confused—wasn't Tsuchimikado always acting like

that? He pushed him out of the plane in the skies over Avignon with a parachute, so probably, right?

The Knight Leader, listening from beside them, spoke. “What’s about to begin is something akin to a strategy council. The members of the Royal Family Faction, the Knight Faction, and the Puritan Faction have all assembled for it. Because the Royal Family Faction leaders—meaning anyone with royal blood—will be participating, it is technically an ‘audience,’ however.”

He cast a glance at Kamijou’s clothing. “…If it were possible, I would have liked you to be in formal dress, but I suppose there’s no helping it considering what you went through. They’re not ones to get angry over a T-shirt and trousers, in any case.”

When he heard that he’d been called out, Kamijou’s shoulders gave a start. *Wait, did I screw up on how high-society this was supposed to be?!* he thought, panicked, until he looked at Kanzaki’s navel and exposed leg. “Well, Kanzaki looks like that, so I guess I’m actually okay…?”

“Did I just hear a rude evaluation of me? They understand my clothing is necessary for the construction of spells,” said Kanzaki, her words steadily growing angrier while her body winced and tried to escape his gaze.

Then Index interjected, “A strategy council? What kind of strategy are they talking about?”

“Mm. It was the decision of the queen herself to officially invite the Index of Prohibited Books—the matter is of enough concern to warrant it.”

The Knight Leader came to a stop in front of doors.

Grand double doors, much bigger than the others in this grand palace.

“I’m sure you’ve heard on the news that the Eurotunnel, which connects the United Kingdom and France, was bombed. All three of the individual tunnels running side by side, too. With the destruction of the seafloor tunnel, the transport of personnel and goods has slowed, dealing a heavy blow to Britain’s domestic economy.”

“???”

“The point is: It’s possible sorcery was involved in the tunnel bombing. A magical attack on a national level,” he explained, his hand touching the giant door’s knob.

Was the stage for the audience beyond that door—the room for

the strategy council where the queen of Britain waited? When he thought about it, Kamijou naturally felt tension run up his spine. He was there as the Index's guardian, so they probably wouldn't need him to say anything—but this council was about to decide the direction of the entire nation.

He gulped.

The Knight Leader turned the doorknob.

But before the doors swung open, they heard this from the gap between them:

<"Ugh…Dresses are the worst. Why can't I just go in a tracksuit?">

The Knight Leader abruptly froze.

Then, as Kamijou was wondering what was just said because he didn't know English, the man quietly said, "Please wait a moment."

He slipped in through the gap in the doors.

<"*Guwhat?!* Can't you knock first, asshole?!">

<"I apologize, but first, if I may—this is an official function, damn it! You did *not* just try to show up in a tracksuit again, you dreary-eyed idiot!!">

<"Hooray, the Knight Leader's the first one here!">

<"It doesn't matter what order we get here in!! Just be more queenly, all right?! No, put that away. Nobody wants you to have an unexpected personality, so please don't force yourself to bring the electric guitar out!!">

A ruckus of pattering feet and slamming followed. Kamijou looked suspiciously at the doors, but for some reason, Kanzaki wouldn't translate the dialogue into Japanese, and Index had just eaten, so she was rubbing her eyes sleepily.

After a short while, the Knight Leader's head poked out between the doors. "…I do apologize for the trouble. Everything's fine now. Queen Elizard has awoken."

"?" Not knowing in the end what had just transpired, Kamijou passed through the doors.

There wouldn't be any stairs up to raised platforms and a giant jeweled throne sitting atop it all like in an RPG. The unnecessarily sprawling space looked like a big room you could use as a party venue. The most unique thing were the tables, set up in several concentric circles like the rings of a tree trunk. It was like the

United Nations assembly room you saw on TV every once in a while.

And in the center…

That person must have been the queen of Britain herself. The Knight Leader had called her Elizard. She was around fifty years old, and the shadow of age was, of course, beginning to creep into her surface features like her skin and hair, but a more fundamental part of her—her core, perhaps, or her frame—looked even stronger than teenage Kamijou's was.

She wore a dress so long it covered her ankles. It was a two-tone outfit in black and white; if you stuck gum on it, you'd probably be paying the cleaning costs for the rest of your life.

Even more striking was Queen Elizard's right hand. It held a sword. A typical western double-sided blade, it was about eighty centimeters long from tip to the end of the grip. But its tip was dull, and it had no edge on it. It looked like it was just a long, narrow rectangular plate coming out of a sword hilt.

The queen was the paragon of a ladylike British woman, but she had a sword…And it wasn't sheathed and hanging at her side; it was hovering in the air, bare.

When Kamijou saw the sword, one impression immediately came to mind.

And he immediately spoke it.

"An unexpected personality…?! H-Himegami was working so hard to get a strange character trait, but she did it so easily…!!"

"No, that's her usual self! I've taken away all those other tools she didn't need, like electric guitars, soccer balls, cup-and-ball toys, and surfboards!! You may not be familiar with it, but that sword is the symbol of Queen Regnant Elizard!!"

The Knight Leader shook his head like he'd recalled a nightmare.

In contrast, the queen opened her mouth into a wide smile. "This is a sword meant for royalty, called the Curtana."

"The Curtana?" repeated Kamijou.

The Knight Leader spoke before the queen could. "A holy sword passed down to the heads of state for generations. To know the history behind the sword is to understand the British royal family itself."

"It's nothing so important," said the queen grandiosely with a grin. "I'll admit it's a useful tool, but it isn't as though the royal

family would end, were it to break."

That rough—if he had to say it, *accustomed*—feeling actually did feel like proof that the Curtana belonged in the queen's hand.

The queen looked again at Kamijou and told him about the Curtana.

"The Curtana is a ritual sword used for coronating kings and queens. It's not proof of kingship but proof of the one who chooses rulers. Anyway, as you can probably tell, it has no blade, and its tip is flat. Letting it hang out won't cause a problem."

"It may seem queer, but it would help us if you overcame the cultural barrier on this matter," said the Knight Leader.

Kamijou, who was neither a knight nor a samurai, didn't understand the value in a bladeless sword. So, he asked Kanzaki:

"(…Is the sword really that great?)"

"Well, yes." Kanzaki nodded. "Whoever owns it gains the same type of power as Michael the Archangel, the LIKENESS OF GOD, albeit a pseudo version of it. The fact that she can freely use the power of one who is not only an archangel but the leader of all angels means you can't exactly call it a normal sword."

"(Leader of the angels…?)" Kamijou whispered, the term disquieting to him.

The sleepy-looking Index explained, "He's the most important and strongest of all the angels."

"…"

The word *angel* brought up only bad memories for him—and now the strongest of them all? Kamijou turned back to face Elizard as the queen put the bladeless Curtana on her shoulder.

"Well, it can only be used within the United Kingdom. Broadly speaking, the Curtana gives the ruler and their knights immense Telesma—angelic power," she explained indifferently. "The important thing is that there are special rules for each of the four cultures—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—and the three factions—the Royal Family, the Knights, and the Puritans—exist to protect them. And the Curtana works by unifying the rules that only apply in Britain and distributing vast power to those who protect it."

"Special rules…?" asked Kamijou.

The Knight Leader continued for his queen, "A unique Crossist denomination called English Puritanism exists in this nation. It was created by Henry the Eighth in the sixteenth century, who disliked

other nations interfering in his nation's politics. In order to repel all foreign influence, he made sure of two things: that his nation was impenetrable by any and all foreign powers, and that the ultimate leader of the English Puritan Church was the king. That way, he wouldn't have to obey the pope."

"Henry the Eighth made himself higher than the pope, elevating the king's position to the 'leader of the angels,'" said the queen. "And he decided to change the orders of knights who served him into his 'angelic army' to lead the people of Britain. That's why the Curtana now grants the same type of power as Michael the Archangel to the Queen Regnant, provided she is in the country."

Elizard took the Curtana off her shoulder. As she twirled the bladeless, tipless sword around like a baton, the Knight Leader picked up where she left off again. "In the sixteenth century, Henry the Eighth used England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland to try to establish this system. The number four represents the land, after all. By assembling a map using a meaningful number of nations, he wanted to create the magical meaning of an 'all-British continent' created with only four countries…A grand continent, free from the influence of various authorities at the time, namely the pope of Rome, yet still extolling a unique and advanced culture. Perhaps the king, worried about the intricate political relationships with adjacent countries, strove to create something like the 'legendary continent' of myth and legend."

His reasoning hadn't been religious but political.

By preparing an all-British continent made up only of those four nations within the greater border of Britain and symbolically linking "the leader of the angels" to its king and "the angelic army" to its knights, Henry VIII gained control over that new continent, magically speaking.

On top of making a magical mechanism that would benefit from the "all-British continent," which couldn't consist of one nation but used several of them to fortify its symbolic image, he also managed to take the political reins of the large, singular nation now known as Britain—the system was overwhelmingly convenient in a political sense.

A kingdom united.

And the one who presided at the pinnacle of those kingdoms, who wielded most of its power…

The queen.

“(…Of course, we can’t be so bold that everyone would detect it like the Angel Fall. I may be strong, but I’m human. I don’t believe I could use the spells of an angel so easily.)”

“What?”

“Nothing. Still, history shows Henry the Eighth didn’t have an easy time of it. Originally, it seemed he wanted to create a rule making himself the leader of the angels by using the four nations of the sixteenth century, but at the time, Scotland was its own nation that was currently at war with England. He had laid out the plan under the assumption he could easily conquer them, but Scotland resisted more than he’d expected, which came close to destroying the rule that it had to be four countries.

“Other than that, he was once troubled by not being able to use the ‘Henry the Eighth equals leader of the angels’ rule in the British colonies because of the rule that it only worked within the four countries.

“Plus, at the moment, we respect Ireland’s independence, and the corresponding locales aren’t being used as a ‘symbol.’ The reason the United Kingdom preserves one part of it, Northern Ireland, is because it needs to keep the system of four cultures,” Elizard explained as she twirled the Curtana.

“In any case,” she said, “the Curtana leveled up from ‘a sword used to decide the king or queen of Britain’ to ‘the sword used to decide the leader of the angels in Britain’…Of course, only royalty and titled nobility can use it, unfortunately for the citizens.”

Kanzaki added from beside Kamijou, “For the Puritan Faction, which I’m a part of, there is no presentation of an angelic leader or angels. We’re treated as ones who wield Crossist power, as the humans we have always been, so we can’t gain the Curtana’s benefit. Please think of the Curtana as something that gives great power to the queen and her knights.”

“The United Kingdom consists of the lands of four cultures, and the three factions exist to protect them. We’re applying this little Curtana thing in order to build relationships between those three factions.”

They all talked about the Curtana, but only the queen seemed to speak of it lightly. It wasn’t that it didn’t feel real to her but that she understood it and had enough strength to laugh those legends away. “And with that, our lecture on the Curtana is finished. I hope you’ve learned a bit about this little tool that comes up in British

history."

"So that whole thing about Buckingham Palace not needing security…?" asked Kamijou hesitantly.

The queen responded as though the thought were absurd. "Is there a person who can kill the angelic leader? I, at least, have never seen one."

…Kamijou didn't really get it, but it seemed like they used it for an extraordinary "ceremony," so he decided not to accidentally touch it with his right hand, moving his caution level to max. After all, any sword used in a ceremony for choosing kings had to be a national treasure, and if he were to do anything to it, he'd surely be in all sorts of trouble.

However, when she saw Kamijou drawing back at the sword's value, Queen Elizard broadened her worry-free smile. "Even if, by some trick of fate, it was to be damaged or destroyed, nobody would blame you. This thing, historically, is the Curtana Second to begin with."

"Um, I have no idea what that name is supposed to mean…"

"Essentially, it's the second one. The one that first appeared in history, the Curtana Original, has disappeared somewhere. They made the Curtana Second in a hurry because it would have made the ceremony difficult. Even if it broke, a new Curtana would be created. Don't be so nervous."

Is that how it is…? wondered Kamijou, but a voice cut in from behind him.

"Please, that isn't true. The Curtana Second may be an artificial version made by the Royal Family Faction, but even the manufacturing method for the second one has been lost to us. We can't exactly make a third or a fourth willy-nilly."

The sound came from the doors.

A beautiful woman in her thirties entered the room, clad in an extravagant dress just as good as the queen's. Hers was mostly blue, but the skirt didn't extend out; it seemed like it was clinging tightly to her leg lines. She wore a monocle on her left eye, giving her the look more of a cool-headed realist than an academic. Her hair, which was shoulder-length, was black—the kind of glossy, unnatural black that might have been attained through dyes.

Extravagant but not over-the-top. Mysteriously, the woman gave off only the impression of quiet gracefulness.

"(…That's Crown Princess Limeia,)" whispered Kanzaki in his

ear.

Meanwhile, the Knight Leader seemed surprised that the princess had come alone, without a single retainer or even a maid. “If you had said something, I would have sent a subordinate—no, I would have come to get you myself.”

“Ah. No, no need for that. Having people obey me? What would I gain from increasing the chances of being backstabbed? I have no intention of granting my trust to those who know me.”

“…” Just as the Knight Leader’s mood seemed to foul, he contented himself with giving an appalled sigh. Princess Limeia’s distrust of others was a regular thing, it seemed.

“Is my sister being a wet blanket again?”

This time, a woman wearing a red dress entered the room—though her “dress,” unlike the other two, was decorated with crimson leather in spots, almost looking like bondage or something. The red-dressed woman’s age was probably just into the later twenties. She also had two knights with her, one on either side.

In contrast to the other two women, she was gaudy.

Her skirt hadn’t fanned out, either, but…it seemed to have a wire framework inside. When she slipped through the entrance, the dress skirt made a parasol-like pop and spread to an unnaturally large shape.

“It’s all gloom and doom with you as usual, Sister. If you won’t trust anyone, you might as well just die. Would solve the problem.”

Sister? wondered Kamijou before the red-dressed woman turned a sharp gaze on him.

“I am the second princess, Carissa. A little study of history would probably do you good, young man.”

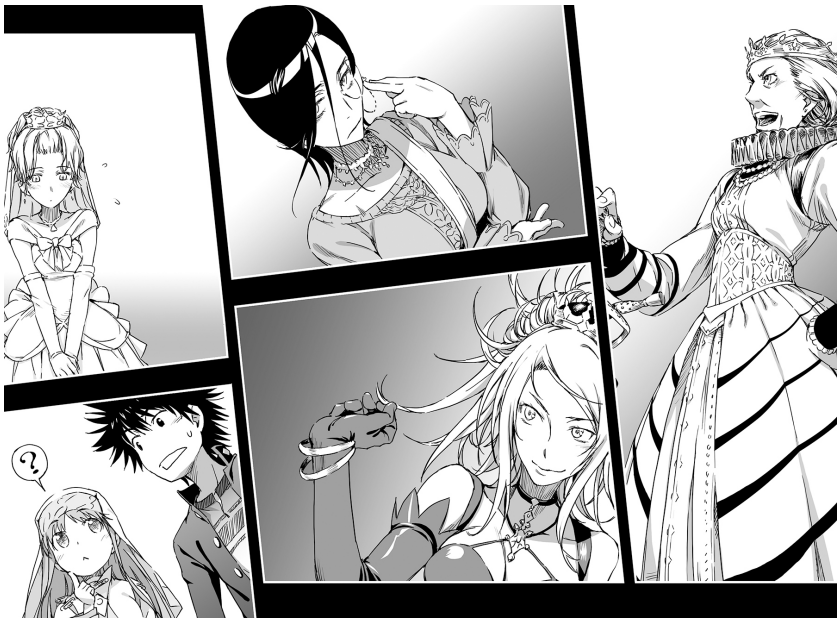
They get names on history timelines just by being born? thought Kamijou, surprised at the sheer scale of their reputation.

Carissa didn’t seem to have any interest in him, though. “Vilian? You’re here, too?”

The sudden address gave the lady wearing a green dress in a corner of the room, whom Kamijou hadn’t noticed before, a start. She had blond hair and fair skin, wore a dress with a big skirt, and was generally the typical kind of princess you might see in a picture book. It seemed to him she didn’t like to wear things that stood out. As the woman named Vilian held her skirt dress down and made herself small, she gave a silent nod, then hurriedly slid away.

“My little sister, the third princess. A boring one, wouldn’t you

say?" said Carissa freely, another comment he found difficult to respond to. Vilian must have heard her as well, but she just made herself even smaller.



After seeing that the three princesses had entered the room, Queen Elizard said, “Looks like everyone’s here.”

Was her call hinting that they would be starting this strategy session called an “audience”? After this, there would probably be a lot of soldiers, sorcerers, and all kinds of other people coming in. Just based on the number of chairs set up in the room, this “council” looked like it would be big, with over a hundred people.

…I kinda feel out of place, he thought, giving himself a pained grin before the queen continued.

“Guess it’s time to get out of here, then.”

……

Kamijou stood there dumbly. He looked at Index, but she had a blank look on her face, too. He looked at Kanzaki, who sighed, and the Knight Leader made a bitter expression and looked away when Kamijou gave him a questioning glance.

Elizard continued with a smile on her face. “When the assembly hall is too large, everyone gets their say recorded, which often makes it hard to voice your own opinions. And with the situation developing by the second, having a hundred people arguing about this thing or that will just be a waste of time. In some cases, it’s more effective to have a few people figure things out in a short time.”

“…I do feel like such cases crop up too often with you, Your Majesty,” said the Knight Leader vacantly.

Kamijou, shocked, looked around at the giant meeting hall. “But, um, is that all right? Doing this with a small group is fine and everything, but won’t other people feel left out…?”

“What? If that happens, you can just say this: ‘I’m fine if you want to meddle in the conversation with your complaints, but if we do things your way and it fails, you’ll be taking all the responsibility for it.’ See?”

“…Whoa.”

“Many people pretend to be experts to voice their opinions, but not very many of them are actually willing to take responsibility. And we can’t have people of such a level interrupting the proceedings. Especially not when the country’s direction is in question.”

Second Princess Carissa nodded at Queen Elizard's words. "As long as we have representatives from the Royal Family, the Knights, and the Puritans in one place, we're good…It aggravates me personally that the leader of the Puritans, who summoned the Index here, isn't present, but I suppose I'll allow it since a saint is here as her proxy."

"I…I apologize," said Kanzaki, bowing her head. "As usual, the archbishop is scurrying around behind the scenes."

Still, thought Kamijou. They had the Knight Leader from the Knight Faction, Kaori Kanzaki from the Puritan Faction…but the Royal Family Faction was crammed in here, with the queen and the first, second, and third princesses. He felt as though there was a bias in who had been invited to this.

"Heh-heh-heh. For better or worse, this country is a kingdom… A nation where a monarch reigns supreme," said the first princess, Limeia, when she saw his face.

He supposed that meant the royal family's opinion was given the most importance when it came to state-level decisions. As he was thinking about it, for some reason, the third princess, Vilian, bowed her head to him in a silent apology.

Meanwhile, Carissa pointed at Kamijou and said, "By the way, aside from the faction reps…What is that kid here for? Could you clear up what his position is at this conference?" Her voice made it sound like she didn't want anyone unnecessary here.

Kamijou didn't exactly feel like he absolutely needed to be here, either, but the queen gave a grin and said, "He's the one who eliminated French terrorists trying to hijack the passenger plane for no reward, saving both Britain's national interests and the lives of its people. In other words, a man of courageous merit. Out of acknowledgment for his deeds and experience, I believe we may let him voice his opinion, no?"

"Hmm. I get it. So that's how it's going to be." The second princess's smile broadened for some reason. She brought her face near Kamijou's. "Courageous, is he? No problem, then. I like how the word sounds."

Ugh…Kamijou winced a little, but Queen Elizard ignored him and wrapped up the conversation. "All right, let's get this meeting rolling. If we waste much more time, it won't make sense to get out of here."

5

The group, beginning with the queen, used the stairs from the first floor of the conference hall, went up to the third floor, and finally assembled in a simple reception area in the corner of a wide corridor. A passing maid, seeing everyone sitting on sofas and relaxing like nothing important was going on, had quite the fright.

Kamijou casually surveyed the group.

The queen of Britain and three princesses, the overdone Knight Faction's leader, plus a heaping helping of the sort of retainers you'd see in picture books. Even of the two he was familiar with, Index and Kanzaki, one was a library of forbidden books storing 103,000 grimoires and the other was one of less than twenty saints in the world…The crowd made him start to doubt whether this was really modern, twenty-first-century society.

…Seriously, what am I doing here? I don't fit in…

Uncomfortable, Kamijou rose from the sofa and, out of habit, went to take his cell phone out of his pocket, meaning to check the time on its screen. But then he remembered the tiny lens attached to it.

The camera.

"(…Hmm, a queen and princesses…Everyone here is someone I'd want a picture with, but I don't know if I should bring out a cell phone in such an, uh, ostentatious palace…)"

Muttering aloud to himself without realizing it, Kamijou decided to put away his phone.

But then—

—the next thing he knew, the second princess, Carissa, had suddenly and quickly approached him. She'd just been sitting across from him a moment ago, but now she was right next to him, close enough that her exposed shoulder was kind of touching his and kind of not. She was tilting her head in his direction, looking at his phone's screen. It was like being in a train and looking at the magazine the person in the next seat over was reading. That was the feeling her posture gave.

It wasn't as though she was actually reading his texts, but he still felt the need to cover up his screen. "…It has a film on it so you can't see it from the side."

"Fool. A princess would never try to sneak a peek like that.

Anyway, didn't you want to take a picture?"

Kamijou, his expression one of puzzlement, looked up from the cell phone in his hand and saw Carissa tilting her body to face the camera, pulling in her chin slightly, and making the softest expression he'd seen her give yet.

Kamijou recoiled. "…Do you practice that face for photos?"

"What are you saying? This is a basic fundamental. Unlike giving speeches to the masses, we can take as many pictures as we need and only use the best one, making it easy to preserve my dignity. I think it's more than fair—I don't prepare any extraordinary lighting or special makeup. It's not like how someone does ridiculous things to photograph food for a cookbook," countered Carissa, her picture-perfect expression fixed in place.

Kamijou could feel her urging him to take the picture…The mere fact that she was making that face meant she probably enjoyed having cameras on her.

He got the impression she'd hold the look forever if he didn't take a picture, so he changed his phone to camera mode and held out his arm.

"Still…Is this okay? Taking a commemorative photo with a princess using a cell phone camera—that doesn't make me a super ignorant kid or anything…?"

"Cell phone cameras are unusual, yes, but if you're going to do it anyway, then I might as well try to look good. It's practically a conditioned reflex…And before you ask, I'm not the only one with this bad habit. Look, my sister noticed the camera. She's closing in."

"Whoa?!"

The next thing he knew, First Princess Limeia was standing on the other side of him. She looked at the screen of his phone. "… Well, well. You took such a perfect picture of my younger sister Carissa, and I'm barely in it. Let's see here; if I get closer like this—is this okay…?"

It was already hard to get three people on a small cell phone screen, but Limeia pushed herself against him, trying to get in the frame. Thanks to that, several graceful, soft parts bumped into his arm.

"(…Gwah?! Wait, what's this? How did I end up in this situation?!)"

"(…Hmm? Well, I don't mind, but if that hard-headed Knight Leader notices, he'll draw his sword, so keep this secret.)"

"…???!!!" Kamijou's face froze into an incredible smile.

And then…

"…"

Slide. So quietly nobody would notice, a third figure stood behind him. She said nothing, and she was right inside the frame—the third princess, Vilian.

Please, hang on. I had her pegged as way more ladylike than these two!!

"Heh, as expected—if we're going to be photographed, you may as well take the initiative, eh?"

"…I, well, wasn't…," the third princess stammered softly to her older sister, though her expression didn't break from her passport-worthy cool and collected one.

What the heck is up with the British royal family anyway? wondered Kamijou, deciding to just take a picture already and get it over with.

But then someone put a stop to it.

The queen of Britain, Elizard.

"…I say. Do any of you realize where we are right now?"

She waved the end of the bladeless, tipless sword around, then planted it firmly on the floor and sighed at them. Seeing that, the Knight Leader and Kaori Kanzaki (not realizing that the first princess's breasts were pressing against Kamijou's arm) nodded in agreement, as though saying *That's right—you tell 'em*.

So Queen Elizard continued, "This is the United Kingdom—the country belongs to the queen! How dare you start taking pictures without the leader of the cast!"

"Ahh, enough, you idiot!! Stop showing your unrestrained festive side in front of people from other countries!! We're currently having a strategy council!!"

As the queen tried to dash for Kamijou and the princesses, the Knight Leader, who had been tearing his hair out, blocked her with a full-force tackle. As Kamijou paled at the sight of them knocked to the ground, the second princess nudged him a couple times with her elbow. Her eyes said it all: *Ignore the idiots and take the picture.*

With an electronic *ka-click*, the shutter snapped, and Elizard's face, pushed to the floor, transformed into a hopeless one. "Ahh, you took it!! You actually took it without including me!! Do it over, do it over! I'll be in it as well—what do you say?!"

The queen wailed as she waggled the Curtana Second around,

but the three princesses gave looks like they'd done what they needed to do and walked back to their original sofa spots.

Elizard stayed on the floor for a few moments, crushed in a few ways, but then, as though remembering the strategy council, she eventually wobbled up to her feet and spoke. "Th-the topic of the discussion is France."

Perhaps in consideration for Kamijou and perhaps because everyone else had mastered the Japanese language, she spoke in Japanese.

The first princess, Limeia, spread out several magazines with horoscopes in them. "France?"

"Indeed," said Queen Elizard with a slight nod to her daughter. "I'll explain in order. The origin of the problem was the Eurotunnel explosion five days ago. This tunnel, the only land route connecting Britain and France, is actually three tunnels running side by side on the ocean floor. But all three of them were blown up together. I've decided that this was an act of sabotage by the French government."

"…And. Do. You. Have. Any. Proof?" interrupted Carissa in a singsong voice. She didn't sound skeptical, though—her tone implied something more dangerous, like she'd prefer pulling the trigger on a war already and settling the problem with force.

The queen shook her head. "No, which is why I've invited the Index. In particular, if any French spells of Roman Orthodoxy were used, the 103,000 grimoires should be able to do an accurate analysis."

With Elizard's eyes now on her, Index turned, startled.

The queen tapped her temple with her forefinger. "Once we've gotten proof, we'll be proactive. I know I have no right to say this, but France's state decisions are wrapped up in fairly complicated processes, like ours are. Some departments even hate any one-sided influence from the Roman Orthodox Church. If we can contact the factions that want to get this over with peacefully, we may be able to solve the problem through dialogue…Of course, this plan is based on optimistic observations on our end. I'll admit it's something we don't expect to work, though we do hope for it."

"France…That means…" Kamijou frowned. Very hesitantly, wondering if it was all right to speak during such an important meeting, he asked, "Was the plane hijacking today related to it? I think those guys were French."

“Well,” said Elizard, looking at him. “The events are more than likely not related, actually. At least, they don’t seem to be under the government’s patronage. I cannot deny the possibility, however, that they knew about it and let it happen.”

She exhaled. “According to on-site police, they testified that they’d taught several groups the tricks to hijacking planes without weapons in exchange for their support…But even then, we don’t know for sure whether those several other terrorist groups really exist…The French government has also asked for custody of the criminals, saying that they’ll punish their criminals in their own country, which is rather shady, if I do say so.”

She voiced a number of doubts but didn’t go too far into detail. She didn’t seem like the kind of person who would pointlessly focus on problems she had too little information to figure out.

“The Skybus 365 is Britain’s main form of air transportation, and now that the hijacking has exposed a weakness, we can’t use them for a while. We’re even doing emergency inspections on other models of passenger plane, just to be safe. Normally, the loss would be acceptable…but with our land route closed off, this will be a major problem.”

“If this shuts down sea routes as well, we’ll be completely isolated,” remarked the first princess, Limeia, with a bored tone, for some reason reading the horoscopes out of several magazines. As she skimmed through various articles of different systems—constellations, blood types, tarots, something written with the symbols for “nine energy studies” (even though they were kanji, Kamijou couldn’t read them)—she said, “For example…Yes, what if we use the aircraft near the seas around Britain to scatter mines? If even one of them lands a hit, private corporations might start thinking twice…even if the areas normally don’t have mines in them.”

“…It’s always you with the scheming ideas,” muttered Carissa bitterly.

Limeia must have taken that as a compliment, or maybe a magazine simply gave her a lucky horoscope, because she smiled thinly. “The question, however, is whether crushing France will really solve the problem. French-type Roman Orthodox spells…It was most likely a direct move from France, but either way, this involves the ones backing them. We shouldn’t think of this issue as a quarrel between Britain and France but as a conflict—with the

United Kingdom and Academy City on one side and the Roman and Russian factions on the other. France is just the vanguard; we can't satisfy ourselves with beating them. And if we use up all our strength on the vanguard, we won't last long after that."

The Knight Leader expressed his agreement. "…Now that the Roman Orthodox Church and the Russian Catholic Church have joined hands, most of Europe is under the umbrella of the Roman-Russian faction—not just the EU but nonmember nations, too. The United Kingdom is currently moving toward isolation. Even if we drive France back now, it's likely another nation will replace them as the vanguard."

"And that isn't our only problem." All eyes focused on Elizard. "We found something interesting during the plane hijacking incident earlier."

"Something interesting…?" repeated Kamijou in spite of himself.

The queen nodded. "We borrowed the help of the Puritan Faction's Necessarius, the Church of Necessary Evils, to resolve the incident. We had them change the fuel meter display in the cockpit using a kind of illusion spell. If it worked, the pilots would think their fuel was decreasing rapidly—leaking, in other words—and be forced to make a landing on a major road that we set up for them. The Knight Faction was on standby after that, ready to commence a sniping attack using the Robin Hood, which would have shot through both the terrorist and the plane walls in the blink of an eye."

"Wait…Did that happen?" Kamijou had been fighting on that plane, and he didn't remember any such thing.

"No, it failed," Queen Elizard continued. *"Somebody remotely interfered with the illusion."*

She took a few papers from the Knight Leader's hands and tossed them onto the table in front of her. Multiple reports fanned out right in front of Index and came to a stop.

"We're currently looking into it—but what of the 103,000 volumes?"

The Library of Grimoires, the Index of Forbidden Books, didn't even seem to think about it. "This was a Scandinavian spell," she said smoothly and without an ounce of hesitation. "Seithr, a sorcery in which female Scandinavian casters specialize, uses a certain kind of song to cause victims to see hallucinations. It looks like they're

applying a spell used for waking someone up from them. It works both on phantoms that trick the mind and on fake images made to appear directly in the air."

"Hmm." Elizard nodded.

Limeia, as though finished reading her horoscopes, folded over the corner of a page advertising efficient body massages. "If they interfered, could they have been sorcerers?"

Carissa frowned. "…From what we already said, the terrorists that hijacked the plane weren't magically inclined."

"The issue is that the interference came from inside the country—from Scotland," replied the queen, her tone bitter.

Carissa's expression twisted into a sadistic one. "Enemies on the inside, too, eh?"

"Either French sorcerers infiltrated without us knowing, or British sorcerers have betrayed us." Limeia smiled, tossing aside a magazine and opening another one. "We'll have to tailor our response depending on which it is. What do you think?"

But Elizard shook her head. "No. All our problem sorcerer did was interfere with a single illusion spell…If they really wanted the terrorists to succeed, they would have seen things through to the end. By shooting the plane down from the ground, for example."

A chill ran up Kamijou's spine.

"Think of it this way," said the queen. "If they were skilled enough to interfere with an illusion from far away, it's highly likely they could put that skill to use for an attack. And yet our sorcerer didn't do anything else. That brings up the possibility that their goal *wasn't to help the terrorists*."

"They weren't cooperating with the criminals, but they interfered with a little illusion anyway…?" asked Carissa dubiously.

"For our mission, we had to secure a runway for the passenger plane to make a forced landing—by closing a major roadway," the queen continued. "…If our sorcerer didn't care about what happened to the plane, their goal could have been to remove the restriction on the roadway."

"…Which would mean that this sorcerer," said Kamijou, "had some reason they absolutely needed to use that road…?"

Elizard huffed, unamused. "If the sorcerer knew the illusion was activated by Necessarius and still tried to interfere for their own purposes, they're quite an idiot. But I sense from them a desire strong enough to warrant treason. An incredibly dangerous desire,

of course."

"It wasn't enough that we have this British-French quarrel to deal with," answered the Knight Leader, "but there's also independent terrorists inside the country?"

The queen nodded.

They had two big problems on their plate. From without and within…Britain would have to deal with attacks from both.

"The roadway in question," the queen continued, "is a road connecting Scotland and England. The interference itself came from Scotland…which means our dangerous sorcerer, as we would have it, might have been attempting to travel south from there."

"If you wish, I can have the Puritans conduct an investigation into societies based in Scotland, just to be sure," suggested Kanzaki. "After all, there are several sorcery factions of all sizes in this country who would see this chaos as an opportunity. At the moment, I can't guarantee we'll come up with an answer right away."

"That's fine," said Elizard. "All I ask is that you do everything you can."

Then the third princess, Vilian, who hadn't said anything before now, opened her mouth and spoke even more nervously than the outsider Kamijou had.

"France, the Roman Orthodox Church, and terrorists…," she said, eyes slightly downcast as she clasped her hands before her chest. "They, too, must be acting because there's something they want to tell us. Can we not bend our ears to their thoughts and guide us all to a nonviolent solution?"

"Of course not," rejected Carissa.

"I will admit that talking is important. But there's no point in talking on and on when we don't need to. Besides, even if they answered us, we'd still need to pay them back in equal measure," agreed Limeia, checking out the special feature on beauty face wash in a magazine. "I don't enjoy physical methods as much as Carissa, but I agree that there is no quick way out of this situation. Come now—you needn't worry. There are ways to keep the grudges between nations at a minimum."

"…" The third princess seemed to want to say something to her two sisters, but in the end, she stayed silent.

The queen, watching their exchange, eventually said, "Either way, there are two things we need to do. The first is to respond to

France, the outside enemy, and investigate the cause of the Eurotunnel explosion. The second is to learn the affiliation and goal of the sorcerers, the inside enemy, and take action to destroy them if need be."

"Which is our priority?" interrupted the second princess. "… Personally, I think the first would be best. I'd like to start setting up our own forces to conduct armed diplomacy."

"No," said Elizard, shaking her head. "We need to investigate the incident that already happened and stop any more from happening in the future. Our first priority should be eliminating the sorcerer's society in the country."

Carissa openly clicked her tongue in frustration but yielded.

"We'll do this one by the books," the queen instructed. "We'll assign the Knights to the outside enemy—the anti-France Eurotunnel investigation—and the Puritans to the inside enemy—the sorcerer's societies in Britain. I hereby grant them authority respective to their roles. However, the Index will not be searching for said societies with the rest of the Puritan Faction. We'll have her on a separate assignment for our own investigation."

The queen was direct in giving instructions to everyone present. Overblown majesty and organizational dignity, those needless decorations common to those in power, weren't part of the picture. All she did was give businesslike orders with the knowledge of what she needed to do as someone who knew her position.

She delegated tasks like a commander.

"Report this decision to your organizations…Let's settle each of these pending issues quickly. After all, there's no nice rule saying only one incident can happen at a time."

6

Kaori Kanzaki had a cell phone to her ear.

At a glance, it looked like she was calling someone, but she wasn't. Her telephone wasn't the thing sending and receiving information—it was the pigeon charm hanging from it. The rubber mascot character vibrated to create a "voice."

"Yes. Yes, that's right. We're looking into Scottish magical groups centered around Edinburgh, but most of these groups seem to be reserves for the actual sorcerer's societies."

The voice belonged to Agnes Sanctis.

Originally the leader of a unit under the Roman Orthodox Church, the girl, along with her entire unit, was currently working for the English Puritan Church. Evidently, they'd been using their greatest weapon—their numbers—to look for any group that might have used an illusion to interfere with the forced landing and headed from Scotland to England using that main artery.

Watching Kamijou and Index out of the corner of her eye, Kanzaki spoke. "Society reserves—such as clubs or circles of friends—not polished to the point of being an actual sorcerer's society but made by newcomers simply interested in magic?"

"They seem to be groups of anywhere from three to five people each. Small groups that don't do anything more serious than love readings. We've confirmed between one hundred and two hundred in existence. In most cases, their 'activities' seem to start and end with meditation or other mental acts, and they dissipate naturally without affecting other people or society at large."

"…And someone like that caused an incident that affected a country?"

"The thing about the society reserves is that it's a mix of small fries who amount to nothing and bigger, actually polished fries. This incident was probably a group of golden eggs."

"Does that mean you've already found something out about their identity?"

"*I'll give you the details at a later time, but there are traces implying they've been secretly doing stuff for quite a while. They seem to have plotted all sorts of things in the past, but they never had a chance to do any of it in reality. They turned up after tracing strange device purchases and dubious eyewitness information*," explained Agnes in a natural tone. *"Our unit depends on our numbers. With our human wave tactics combined with English Puritan authority, we can get our hands on quite a bit of information."*

She said the next part as though she was reading from a memo. *"Their group is called New Light. Their composition is the typical society reserve layout, but their polish is far superior to all the others. They seem to be using the category of 'society reserves' to maintain a relaxed position. Four members in all. I'll send you their names and pictures later."*

"Where's their base?"

"We found it, but we were too late." Agnes's voice was tinged with bitterness. *"The place was set up to manufacture Soul Arms of fair*

quality, though it smelled of Scandinavian magic to me. Also, there was a detailed map of a certain city. Not just where roads and buildings are located—it was detailed down to the surveillance cameras, of which there's said to be tens of thousands in the city."

"Tens of thousands of cameras…Wait!"

"Yes." Agnes paused, then said this:

"London. It seems like they're ready to do something serious."

Kanzaki bit her lip.

This time, Agnes sent a question her way. *"We know the main road they used, right? Why not figure out their route from their base to London and set up a checkpoint?"*

"…I'll make arrangements, but it won't be a perfect guarantee. Scandinavian magic has a lot of Soul Arms you can conveniently conceal. At worst, they could break through an inspection station by force."

"Stop being so wishy-washy about it, then, and block off the entire road physically—"

"Look, I'm doing what I can here, but we're already not getting enough supplies from outside the country. If we block off a transport route in Britain, it could mean hanging ourselves. An inspection station is all we can manage."

"Which means…"

"I'll do everything I can to prevent them from getting inside the city, but if worse comes to worst, they might make a move in London." Kanzaki repositioned her phone. "What about their motives? Do you know exactly what they plan to do in London?"

"*I mentioned before about signs that they've been active in secret for a while, but…*," she began evasively, her voice shrinking. *"We don't have proof, but there is a possibility that New Light's members are involved in some kind of mining operations in Scotland…I mean, we didn't get any mission plans or anything. We only speculated based on the list of devices they'd bought."*

"Mining operations…?" Kanzaki frowned.

Agnes continued, sounding rather baffled, as though she honestly didn't have enough proof. "They seem to have been active mainly near castle sites, but we don't know exactly what they were trying to get. Based on the ratio of time to money, though, it must have been something central to their plans."

Magical items, most likely—Soul Arms.

And if they were digging them up instead of making them, maybe that meant they were the kind modern materials would have a hard time creating.

"Then perhaps we should assume they're bringing Soul Arms they 'mined' into London and want to cause some kind of destruction."

"It's not conclusive evidence, but there was a very mysterious note at their base. It had today's date and a simple sentence on it." Agnes paused. *"It said, 'Today, we will change Britain.'"*

"A strange message, to be sure…but you certainly can't interpret that in a peaceful way." Kanzaki shifted her grip on the cell phone again. "Agnes, continue investigating New Light's base. What did they get from their mining in Scotland, and what do they plan to do with it in London? If we can figure out their goal, we'll have a greater chance of preempting them…We intend to intercept New Light outside London to the best of our ability, but we may need to consider skirmishes in the city. Please look into what New Light has equipped themselves with so we can prepare for that as well."

"*Right*," came the reply before the call cut off.

Kanzaki turned to Kamijou and Index, who'd been standing listlessly that whole time. "…I need to see to London's security with the rest of Amakusa."

"Are you fighting the sorcerers inside the country they were talking about?" asked Kamijou.

"Yes. You…or rather, Index should go to the site of the explosion in the Eurotunnel. The investigation is leaving from Folkestone, so please head there."

"Folkestone? Doesn't the Eurotunnel go through a place called Dover?"

"Yes. However, its terminal on the British side is in Folkestone, a town several kilometers away. Anyway, please head there at once."

"Huh? What?" Kamijou was confused, but then someone else cut in.

"Actually, young man, it looks like you can't go to Folkestone."

Approaching them was the second princess, Carissa. She pointed at Kamijou's right hand. "I've gotten the report—that thing will nullify any kind of magic. I don't think it would be a great idea

for you to get near the Eurotunnel, since it's being held up by magical methods right now. It could also affect the analysis work."

"But he's Index's guardian—both the English Puritan Church and Academy City recognize that," argued Kanzaki.

"I understand that, but this could change the relationship between Britain and France. And aren't the inner workings and principles of that right hand unknown? It's not like you have any proof it won't disrupt the investigation."

"Then…" Kanzaki began to speak, then hesitated.

"I will be going to the terminal in Folkestone to do the Eurotunnel investigation personally, along with my two sisters and the Index. We'll have a unit from the Knights there for security, a team directly under the Knight Leader. That should clear up any issues, right?" Carissa said lightly. "If you'd be happier if a Puritan bodyguard was with her, you can come with us to Folkestone…But I'm sure you can't spare the hands right now. And I'm not going to hold you back, either."

"That's…That's true, but…," stammered Kanzaki.

Maybe she couldn't complain based on her position or something. In this situation, it was actually easier for Kamijou, an outsider, to make a remark. "Just the three princesses? Not the queen?"

"Mother apparently has some work to do at Windsor Castle, our other home. Possibly preparing her little tricks to use against France. It probably has to do with how the leader of the Puritan Faction has been sneaking around lately."

Kanzaki and Necessarius would search for the sorcerers en route to London.

The three princesses and Index would be investigating the Eurotunnel.

The queen and the leader of the Puritan Faction would be doing sneaky stuff in Windsor Castle.

"…Wait, so what exactly am I supposed to do?"

"Touma!!"

Before the second princess could answer, Index put her hands on her hips. "There's your bad habit again! You always go wherever there's an incident!! You're just a regular person, so you can just wait here for everything to be over!!"

"Are you sure about that? Necessarius is spread pretty thin, inside and outside Britain, so they're probably short on hands. It

would be more efficient for everyone to be somewhere they can be useful."

"N-no," said Kanzaki. "We could certainly use every person we can get right now, but…I still don't think it's a good idea to put a civilian in danger."

It was at that very moment that Queen Elizard passed by.

She said this:

"Oh, right. Yes. If he's a civilian, we don't need to force him to help us. We can have him stay here as he likes until the situation is resolved."

"That's right, Touma." Index nodded in agreement.

"However, if someone staying here were to, say, act outside our national interests and run up a bill, we can't have taxpayers' precious money paying for that. I'll have them add up those costs separately in a few days—does that sound good? Oh, think of it as the cost of two or three suites in a high-class hotel with bad taste. It's a good deal, isn't it?"

"…Please humbly allow me to help you for the sake of Britain's peace," said Kamijou with a bow.

7

It was a scene straight out of a commercial for milk or butter.

Gentle, green sloping hills all the way to the horizon. The odd cattle barn or silo dotting the view. It was eleven in the morning, so the beef cattle were probably asleep in their pens, but the milk cows were slowly grazing their pastures.

A road ran through the fields of green, splitting it in two.

And on that road drove a car. A small one, one that felt somewhat cramped for an entire family. It looked like a rental car borrowed from somewhere, and four girls were packed inside it.

One girl, sitting in the backseat, was sticking her head out an open window. She was in her teens, wearing a bluish miniskirt and a rough-looking jacket zipped up all the way to her neck. Her long black hair was braided but only at the end.

"Blech, we have to say good-bye to this smell of greenery soon…"

"Get down, Lesser," came an unhappy voice from next to her. "I can see your ass. Also, your tail is in the way."

It was a young woman of about eighteen with silver hair. She

wore the same thing as Lesser but without a jacket. She had on a long-sleeved running shirt, with the chest poking out an awful lot. There were a few small buttons near her neck, but they were all undone, so you could see a little of her cleavage. The legs inside her miniskirt were covered in blue leggings, all the way down to her ankles.

"Put that away, or I'm pulling it off."

"Don't be such a hard-ass, Bayloupe. Why are you so angry anyway?" Her eyes still out the window, Lesser sent a command to her "tail." She put it "away," but that didn't mean it retracted into her body. Instead, it coiled like a snake inside her miniskirt, around the top of her thigh.

But this time, possibly to pull her tail back in, Lesser lifted her rear end high.

With white panties nearly crammed in her face, Bayloupe's eyebrow began to twitch. "Didn't you hear me?! I just said!! Put that thing away!!!!!!"

"*Gwaaaaaahhhhh?!* Grabbing with two hands right off the bat?! Hey, Bayloupe blew her fuse before the mission even started!! Tell her to stop, Florice!!"

"Well, you know, I'm pretty busy driving right now."

The blond girl gripping the steering wheel was listless. She was around fifteen years old, and her clothing was, again, much the same as the aforementioned passengers. She had her jacket on over a running shirt, but it was open, and under her miniskirt, she wore spats.

"…More importantly, the scenery hasn't changed in a long time. I don't remember this road being the kind you can get lost on. Lancis, are you sure this is the right road?"

The driver named Florice tossed the conversation to the brown-haired girl helping her navigate from the passenger seat, but…

"P-please stop…That tickles…Ah-ha…Whenever the mana…the mana hits me, it makes m-my whole body tickle…Ee-hee-hee-hee…"

"Shit. She's shaking all over from mana she made herself. Where in the process of refining life force into mana does it feel that ticklish…?" Florice clicked her tongue and glanced at the backseat through the rearview mirror. "I know you two lesbians are about to bust into an erotic novel back there, but did you finish setting up Skithblathnir? We went through all the trouble to

excavate *that thing*, so pay close attention to them, too."

"You fool!! If you do it like that, it's only gonna hurt my butt!! Huh? You mean the 'cases'? We finished setting all four of them up already."

"Wonderful, Lesser. As a reward, I'll tell you that Bayloupe's weak spot is her calves."

The shaking and rattling of changing positions sent vibrations through the vehicle. Florice took a hand off the wheel to massage one of her shoulders. "And the 'wings' are good to go…And it looks like we don't have to worry about the 'tail,' either."

The rearview mirror showed a wriggling Soul Arm coming from Lesser's miniskirt as she rampaged. It wasn't an animal tail so much as a deformed devil tail.

"Are your 'claws' all right, Lancis?"

"Ahfya…All ready here…Th-that tickles, hee!"

After hearing the reply from the passenger seat, Florice looked into the rearview mirror again. "Hey. You're still not done setting up the 'scissors' yet, are you? Get that done before we arrive. As you can see, I have my hands full driving. Lancis is too ticklish to be useful right now. You two are the only ones with free use of their hands."

"Bayloupe is berserk! I'll do anything if you tie her up!! Also, hitting her calves isn't doing a thing to her!!"

Sounds like a pain, thought Florice, ignoring her and gazing ahead. "Anyway. Pull yourselves together. We're about to pull apart the entire framework of the United Kingdom."

The road came to a fork where a traffic sign was in front of them. On it was a simple arrow and English letters, which read:

STRAIGHT AHEAD: 30 KILOMETERS TO LONDON.

8

Kamijou was in the passenger seat of a red convertible.

At night, London smelled kind of like exhaust. Many a centuries-old historical building lined the streets, but the stench covering everything clashed with the scenery, ruining the mood.

"I have to say—I never thought you'd show up here."

"Oh, well. This was an unexpected development for me, too," giggled the sorcerer, her manicured fingers on the steering wheel.

Oriana Thomson.

She had blond hair, green eyes, and beyond all that, a huge rack. She'd once tried to wreak havoc in Academy City with her partner Lidvia Lorenzetti during its citywide athletic festival, the Daihasei Festival.

She'd fought Kamijou, Stiyl, and Tsuchimikado evenly, making her astonishing combat skills known. Ultimately, though, they stopped her ambitions, and the English Puritan Church took custody of her…

"I've had a lot going on, too," she said. "I cut a little deal, and now I'm using my skills for Britain instead."

"…Wait, so this Eurotunnel explosion—France and their supporters, the Roman Orthodox Church—they're all linked to it, right? I don't know anything about the sorcerers who move around inside Britain, but they could be related, too. Are you sure you should be baring your fangs at them?"

"Just for your information, my real job consists of working as a magical courier. I haven't sworn my allegiance to any particular group. I'm free to help whatever faction and fight against whoever I want—in fact, as long as there was a reward, I wouldn't mind breaking a sweat for you…*personally*."

Feeling a sweet breath on him, Kamijou locked up. As a high school kid, he was uncomfortable around this sexy lady for a few reasons.

"O-oh," he managed. "Then, what? Do they want you to use your courier skills to find the sorcerers we're looking for?"

"Well, fleeing and chasing are two entirely different skill sets. You probably wouldn't understand without experiencing it yourself."

"Where are we going now, then?"

"The deal was whether our suspects, a four-person group known as New Light, would get into London or not…but the inspection station they set up midway there seems to have failed. I found some strange traces there."



"…Then they're already inside?"

"You know how there are tens of thousands of surveillance cameras set up in London? One of them, in northern London…," she said, pressing a button on the GPS with her slender fingertips. It changed to an odd video, like looking down from a street light at the road. "This video is from ten minutes ago."

Kamijou stared at the video for a few moments as it fast-forwarded. "…Hey, nothing's happening."

"There is something. The top edge of the screen. Can't you see the shadow of a car there?"

Now that she mentioned it, he sort of did, but he wondered why she had to bother showing him this camera's video. If there were tens of thousands of them, he figured there'd be one looking directly at the car.

"There isn't," answered Oriana. "No matter what video you look at, none of them show what road that car came from. They knew exactly where every single camera is, and they parked their car right in a blind spot—can't exactly chalk that up to coincidence."

"But does that really tell you they're the sorcerers?"

"No, which is why we're going to look," said Oriana, returning the GPS to its navigation screen. "The roads in London are like a grid, but only so many of them are important traffic spots. Even more so if you're trying to weave between the cameras' blind spots…Whether or not they're the sorcerers we're after, we'll catch them soon. If something looks fishy, we check it out. Then we just wait for a hit."

Her remarks made it seem like they were falling behind, but there was no helping it—they didn't know if this was the real deal. In fact, they still didn't know what this New Light group was even trying to do in London.

"…Are we going to find them like that?"

"Ah well, in reality, it's much more unusual to be chasing someone knowing exactly what they're after."

9

One member of New Light, Bayloupe, was near a staircase leading down to the entrance of a subway station, leaning against the wall.

Attentive to the worn-out rectangular bag at her feet, every once in a while, she glanced at the hands on an illuminated clock tower face.

Using a communication Soul Arm, she contacted her other teammates.

"Now then. Has the game begun? We have Lancis as the goalkeeper. If we win, the current British administration will crumble from its foundations, and London might not go unscathed, either. Not that there's any particular reason to bust up the city streets more than we need to, though."

One member of New Light, Lancis, placed a worn-out rectangular bag on the ground and sat on it. With a long, thin package in her hands and her body trembling, she looked up at the night sky.

Using a communication Soul Arm, she contacted her other teammates.

"…It…It tickles…Th-that's why, ah, why we…why we went for this time of day, when everyone's already gone home…Ah-ha. At least, it shouldn't be as chaotic as…as the daytime…Hhyauuu…"

One member of New Light, Florice, walked down a small road just off a main street. She had a worn-out rectangular bag over her shoulder, hanging there casually like combed-back hair.

Using a communication Soul Arm, she contacted her other teammates.

"I would have liked to use Opila, but if we used any kind of barrier, they'd find us right away…On the other hand, we can use that to divert their attention, too. Anyway, we halves will launch a swift attack and end things quickly."

And…

One member of New Light, Lesser, was in a bar on the outskirts of the city. The people here near the edge of Islington in northern London all seemed the sort to drink at least two liters each.

Lesser, a girl in her early teens, stood out like a sore thumb, but when she told them she'd come all the way here on vacation to find that all the restaurants had closed for the day, the muscle-bound manager had given her a plate of fish fries on the house. For her drink, she had orange juice.

After this and that, she sat at the bar cramming the sizzling-hot fries into her mouth, with the strap of a thin case about one meter long hanging from her shoulder. A worn-out rectangular bag also sat at her feet.

Then she heard a "voice" directly reach her mind.

"*Look, I'm glad you're catching a meal without us, but you haven't forgotten you're one of the halves, too, right?*" Bayloupe said. *"You bungle things in a place like this, it's your fault."*

"*I would never!*" Lesser spat back. *"But I wish I could have been the forward…Wait, Bayloupe, isn't it dangerous to use sorcery for communication inside London? This is still the 0th parish's home base."*

"Being in Necessarius's backyard is what's really worrying me. Ugh, why did it have to be you watching my back?"

"*You're just mad because you're hungry, aren't you?*" Lesser chided. *"Here, I'll add olfactory information to our call! See, isn't the smell coming from the grease just the greatest?"*

"(…I swear.)" Bayloupe could be heard muttering to herself. *"(And for some reason, she had to be the one with the most combat power in New Light, too. Sigh. Still, now I want to eat something. Fish fries, huh?)"*

"Hee-hee. Thank you very much for those leaked thoughts— Bugyahhh?!*"*

Their communication cut off with a brain-rattling screech of mental white noise. The obviously spiteful act having sent her head spinning, Lesser resumed her battle with her fish fries.

All right. Once I finish these up, I'll carry the bag to the designated spot. Then all I have to do is wait for instructions…I wonder if Britain will change. I hope it does…

Lesser hummed a happy tune to herself and swung her feet around underneath her stool. Her toes struck the rectangular bag in question.

Whoopsies, whoopsies, whoop…sies?

Her movements came to an abrupt halt.

Not because the bag was gone.

The rectangular bag she'd brought was still right at her feet where she'd put it.

But…

There seemed to be a second rectangular bag there.

They both had the exact same features. Frankly, she could

barely tell the difference between the two.

"…"

Nervously, Lesser looked to her side.

Instead of the customer who'd been there a moment ago, there was now a tall black-skinned man sitting on the small stool. The other rectangular bag probably belonged to the frothy-beer-guzzling man.

Now, then.

Which was the bag Lesser had brought?

Gyaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!! Crap, crapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrap!!

Bayloupe had just cautioned her moments ago, and she'd already gotten into trouble.

She could check the contents to be sure, of course. The bag itself was a Soul Arm called Skithblathnir, the Great Ship Cloth. If she activated its magic, she'd tell them apart. But she couldn't. She couldn't open the rectangular bag *here*, and if she wasn't careful and triggered that huge spell, the risk of Necessarius finding them would increase.

As she was wondering about it, the tall man finished downing the contents of his mug. "Ooh-wee. That's enough for today, I think."

"What? That's only your third one, isn't it?"

"Doctor told me to lay off the booze. Said I gotta drink in moderation."

"Then you shouldn't have even had three."

As he and the manager talked, the tall man began counting out bills on the counter.

Crap. I don't think I know which one is mine…

For an instant, her attention moved to the thin case about a meter long hanging from her shoulder, and she barely stopped herself. If she took the "weapon" out here, that was sure to cause a huge problem.

Agh, come on!! Which is it? Which one?! Right?! Left?! Which is Skithblathnir?!

As she racked her brain, the tall man reached for the rectangular bags at their feet with a wobbly arm.

Then…

Gshhh!! Lesser's small hand grabbed the man's wrist.

"Hm?" The man looked at her questioningly.

Lesser said, “Th-that one’s mine. This one is yours, sir.”

“H-huh?! Oh, I see, I see. Sorry about that, young lady.” The man gave a pained grin, then picked up the other rectangular bag.

As she watched the drunk black man get out of his seat, Lesser heaved a sigh.

…Safe…Jeez, a little more, and I’d have been in for a butt-crushing from Bayloupe…

If she had to say, she was pretty sure her own rectangular bag had been more scuffed up. She ran a finger over its surface, checking the feel of her own possession, and managed to come to the conclusion that it was hers.

Lesser finally relaxed. She buried her face on the counter, exhausted. When the manager saw her, his expression became rather worried, and he mumbled, “What? I didn’t let her drink anything, right?”

And then Lesser saw it.

There seemed to be a third rectangular bag on the floor.

Sweat began to pour down her cheeks in buckets.

This one must have been another drunkard’s belongings. Or maybe someone forgot it here. But after seeing this third one, her confidence wavered. Which one was the real one, again? Was it this one? Did it look a little different just because of the way the light was? What about the one the black man took before? *I want to look at them all at the same time! Ah, but he’s already left the bar!!* Lesser was at her wits’ end, and then…

“N-nobody moooooooooooooooooooooooove!!”

…It was said that Bayloupe, who learned of the events through their Soul Arm communication, nearly foamed at the mouth and collapsed.

10

It was the car that was apparently parked in a surveillance camera blind spot.

Kamijou and Oriana came right up to it in the convertible, but then Oriana suddenly turned the car a different way. The GPS must

have had a radio in it; he began to hear a man speaking static-filled English.

"Just got a notice. Looks like one of them slipped up!!"

"Whoa?! Wait, from Necessarius?"

"No, from the London Police, under the Royal Family Faction's intervention. Seems like some idiot is making trouble in a bar nearby!!"

Many patrol cars were on the road, their red and blue lights flashing. Oriana, as though she had some kind of permission, ignored the speed limit and drove the convertible into their group. After Oriana pulled a hard right at an intersection without using her blinker, Kamijou's eyes caught sight of something strange—

It was a short girl dashing down a brick road.

Wearing a thick jacket and a miniskirt—and for some reason carrying three rectangular bags—she said, <"Um, which one, which one, this one?! It was this one!! Crap, if I had lifted them up a little to test the weight, it would have been easy!!">

Kamijou didn't understand the swift stream of English, but based on her expression and behavior, she seemed to be regretting something. She threw two of the bags she was holding onto the road, then continued running with the one remaining.

That in itself was a strange situation, but something else was even more eye-catching.

Something was tucked between her shoulder and cheek like a phone.

It was a spear.

Strictly speaking, it was a metal shaft of a spear about 1.5 meters long. It seemed to have been made so you could store a thinner shaft inside a thicker shaft in order to increase portability. An additional forty centimeters of blade was affixed to its tip. Not only one blade, either—there were three on the upper part and one on the lower part. Given how the spear's bottom end was shaped like a bicycle hand brake, it probably opened and closed via lever operation.

"What's that…?"

"Some sort of Soul Arm, I'm sure. Clearly an explosion of suspiciousness. That's got to be one of New Light's members. Gracious, don't sorcerers have any awareness of how strangely they

dress?"

"…" Kamijou looked Oriana up and down without a word. She didn't realize it.

Oriana took her hands off the wheel and reached into her cleavage. From there, she drew out a bundle of notecard-like papers. She bit one of the flashcard pages with her teeth, then moved her jaw to tear it from its metal link. Then, as they passed by the girl running down the road, she threw it onto the ground.

"It's a ward," she said as something seemed to activate.

Kamijou didn't understand why, but their target's face abruptly looked upward.

A moment later, the card Oriana had thrown flipped over. She'd used two cards at once.

Before he'd realized it, characters had appeared on the previously blank page.

They spelled out *Fire Symbol* in yellow lettering.

And that was the key to the courier Oriana Thomson's sorcery that wouldn't let her use any spell more than once.

Pop-boom!! An explosion of flame ripped along the street.

Nearby shutters and windows rattled and shook, and the darkness of night was lit up in red.

After seeing the explosion, Oriana shifted the hand brake, abruptly cut the wheel, and did a U-turn almost without losing any momentum. The convertible's nose pointed back at the blast, and the car itself stopped there.

Kamijou was the one who panicked. "H-hey!! Wasn't that going a little too far?!"

"No—in fact, this isn't looking good!!" Oriana shouted back, throwing open the driver's side door and nearly rolling down out of the vehicle.

"?" Kamijou was confused.

Jingle. He heard a metallic rubbing noise.

It came from beside him.

He didn't have time to fully look that way. In the span of what he could call an instant, his eyes just barely managed to move in that direction and saw that the girl in question had slid right up

next to the passenger seat. As she ran with the speed of a cannonball, something trailed behind her. It was a "tail." A clear tube, like a bike chain lock, extended from under her skirt, inside of which was something metal and flat.

Their eyes met. She said this to him in English: <"No complaints, I'm sure?">

The girl shoved the "spear's" tip through the metal door—in order to pierce both the door and Kamijou's gut.

"Errr…*raaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*?!"

Ignoring the car's structure, Kamijou planted his foot on the passenger seat and immediately jumped forward toward the hood. The instant his feet left the seat, he definitely felt the four blades that pierced through the door make a shallow cut in his basketball shoes.

Thump!! The impact of the spear piercing the metal door came a moment later.

After landing on the hood, Kamijou jumped again, this time onto the road.

Then he heard a strangely loud clunking noise.

He turned around and saw the short teenage girl rip the convertible's passenger side door off. She had swung it around, her "spear's" tip stuck through it. In contrast to the absurdly violent sight, the "tail" in her miniskirt wagged humorously.

She swung the spear again, along with the passenger side door its four blades had pierced. Not thrusting it but swinging it. But it wasn't aimed at Kamijou.

It was aimed at the back of the convertible—at its fuel tank.

There was a high-pitched groan as it easily tore through the metal wall. The weapon's tip sank into the fuel tank.

With an ear-shattering roar, the convertible exploded.

That, however, wasn't what surprised Kamijou.

The flames, which should have been spreading in every direction…

The four blades the girl carried had "grabbed hold" of them.

He had no idea how it worked, but the four blades forming the "spear" opened wide like human fingers. When they clenched closed again, it suppressed all the flames that almost scattered all about the area.

Flames leaked from the gaps between the blades, but then created a new form in the air.

About one meter long at maximum, its sides of unequal lengths —an unnatural block of fire.

The four blades looked just like a fork stabbing a giant carrot.

Instead of blowing out, the explosive flames swayed heavily with the four blades' movements.

After she lifted the flame-imbued spear like a hammer, the girl's eyes met Kamijou's as he sat on the ground, having fallen there in surprise.

She was grinning.

Kamijou immediately got his right hand ready to defend himself, but she brought the spear down at a slightly angled trajectory, aiming to weave around his defense.

"You're kidding me…?!"

As his body tensed, his eyes alone moved, following the flaming spear held by the girl, "tail" hanging from her miniskirt.

But then…

Boom!! An impact slammed into the girl from the side, doubling her over and sending her flying.

It was Oriana, who had gotten out of the car before him, and her sorcery.

The girl's body soared several meters. She was still clutching the spear, but the giant clump of flame wrapped around its tip slipped right out like the fork had shaken the carrot off. It flew off in the wrong direction, exploding and spreading orange light over the road.

But the girl still didn't go down.

Her heels scraped against the road to decelerate. She'd used the rectangular bag in her other hand to parry Oriana's sorcery.

Sizzling smoke rose from the surface of the bag as the girl gave a sharp, glinting glare from behind her shield.

However…

<"*Oohhhhwwaaaaaahhhhhh?!* Crap, I accidentally used it to block! It's the most important thing and I used it as a shield!!">

Kamijou couldn't understand a word of her native English, but the sorcerer seemed to be panicking. He, however, had almost just been killed by the confused and upset girl, so he said it straight.

“Hey, Oriana. I don’t really get it, but I think that rectangular bag is her most important item. I didn’t want to beat up a girl anyway, so let’s concentrate our attacks on the bag.”

“Quite fine by me. And if it is a kind of Soul Arm, wouldn’t it be interesting to try punching it with your right hand?”

When the girl heard them going about their strategy session, her shoulders gave a start. “Y-you’ve done well to spot my weak point in such a short time! But I cannot afford to be defeated here! Partly because Bayloupe would crush my butt. It seems I shall have to make a tactical retreat. *Toh!!*”

With a wide, pendulum-like swing of her “tail,” she jumped straight up.

After her vertical ascent brought her up three stories along a building, she broke a window and dove inside.

Nobody made a fuss about it because Oriana had used a concealing Opila at the last moment.

As for the girl, she wasn’t bothering to be discreet.

“Damn…,” cursed Kamijou. “Can we even follow that?!”

With that much jumping power, she could freely come and go throughout the city without having to use roads. Hoofing it was out of the question, but even chasing her by car would be difficult. After all, cars could only move on roads.

“That’s not true,” said Oriana, though, dismissing his unease. “She can move between buildings and rooftops, but there’s a limit. Buildings are built along roads to begin with. If she’s using those buildings to move, she’ll naturally have to follow roads.”

“?”

“Don’t understand yet? If she runs into a main road, three or four lanes to a side, we can prevent her from moving from building to building.”

“Is it possible she’ll jump from a building to the road?!”

“If she could do that, she probably wouldn’t need that ‘tail.’ It’s insurance for keeping her balance in the air. It’s the same as how certain monkeys use their tails to jump from tree branch to tree branch. If she brought a Soul Arm like that, it means even she’s afraid of being higher than a certain elevation!”

Which meant the sorcerer wasn’t all-powerful.

And that her escape route would naturally begin to constrict.

“Are we going after her?”

“Of course!!”

Kamijou and Oriana nodded to each other, then began to run through the London night.

11

Near a subway station entrance about a kilometer away from said disturbance, Bayloupe was at her wits' end.

That idiot…!! Of all the things she could have done—the trouble she's causing is leaking intel not only to the 0th parish but to the damn London Police…!!

Shrill cries of *"Help me, help me!"* were still coming over her communication Soul Arm, but Bayloupe gritted her teeth—at this point, she wanted to be the one to finish Lesser off.

The stairs down to the subway were surrounded by walls on three sides. It was almost midnight—in other words, time for the last train—so a lot of office workers and drunks were being drawn to the stairs. Amid the crowd, Bayloupe leaned her back against one of the walls, then focused on the meter-long package hanging from her shoulder and the worn-out rectangular bag she'd dropped at her feet.

…Either way, even if the worst comes to pass, we'll still "activate" at least one. For now I should wait for Lancis to contact me. The holdup is not knowing the positional information even when our back is against the wall. Our destination being unknown is making quick improv difficult.

She exhaled through her nose and, with her arms folded, stared at the office workers coming and going. Not only were there typical British stock-trader types in the crowd; she could see a Japanese person or two here and there. Their black hair stood out in the sea of blond. When she looked casually in their direction, the number of people with black hair increased to eight or nine—and before she knew it, *there was nobody but Japanese people around her*.

"…?!"

Suddenly surrounded, Bayloupe glanced at the "package" hanging from her shoulder. Meanwhile, one girl stepped out of the group of Japanese people and slid over to her.

"English Puritan Church, 0th parish, Necessarius, the Church of Necessary Evils—understand?" said Itsuwa, member of the Amakusa-Style Crossist Church, in an officer-like tone. Despite being in the middle of the hustle and bustle, she was already

gripping a sort of cross spear in one hand.

After the girl made her incomprehensible introduction, which only people in that line of work would understand, Bayloupe's lips pulled back into a smile, arms still folded.

"…So, you've gotten here already?"

"We make it a principle to blend in with our environment. But we also have ways to search out people acting unnaturally. Of course, the techniques were originally for quickly spotting Bakufu watchdogs blending in with the townspeople."

Bayloupe sniffed. "I see—so you're under their banner. Jeez, I guess the 0th parish really does scrape together whatever they can get their dirty hands on."

"We will now escort you to the Tower of London. Shall I read out your crimes just to be certain?"

"No, that's quite all right." Bayloupe unfolded her arms and reached for an inside pocket. With movements casual enough to look like she was putting headphones on, she attached something like hearing aids to the backs of her ears. Each of them, however, had two vacuum-tube-looking things sticking out of it.

"Until I 'activate' this bag…"

Bayloupe, having put on special ears, or perhaps horns, reached with her toes to the grip of the rectangular bag she'd put on the ground.

"…I'm not about to let anyone catch me!!"

With a kick, she flung the rectangular bag into the air, then grabbed it with one hand. At this, Itsuwa unflinchingly thrust her spear. Her aim was the right shoulder. She wanted the spearpoint to drill into the joint between her shoulder and arm.

Whump!! A noise split through the air.

But Bayloupe's soft skin wasn't sliced.

The reason: the "package" that was hanging from her shoulder. It had detected her intent and burst open from within—and the "weapon" inside it was swung in a horizontal arc. It wasn't a spear nor was it a barehanded attack; the "weapon" was a long metal rod with four blades attached to the end. When Itsuwa had stabbed with her spear without a second thought, Bayloupe's "weapon" collided with it, scattering sparks and pushing each away from the other.

If Kamijou had been there, he probably would have thought the "weapon" Bayloupe had was the same as the sorcerer girl's he'd

already encountered.

"…!!"

With a shrill metallic whine, the dozens of Japanese people around the two of them all took out their hidden swords and axes at once. Even surrounded by the threatening glint of steel, though, Bayloupe grinned defiantly. The hand gripping her "weapon" tightened even more.

Spinning her entire body, Bayloupe swung her "weapon."

Itsuwa went on the defensive out of reflex, but the attack hadn't been aimed at anyone from Amakusa. Instead, Bayloupe destroyed the concrete wall she'd just been leaning against.

The walls around the stairs leading down to the subway were set up on three sides like an open rectangle. Bayloupe had just crushed one like a biscuit. Her intent was clear:

To flee.

"Kuh!" Itsuwa grunted in frustration and loosed another spear thrust. It never made it to Bayloupe's body, though. She was already rushing down the stairs—and through the debris—to the subway station.

"Itsuwa!!!"

"I know!! Tatemiya, please position everyone else at all the other entrances!!" she shouted back to her colleague, plunging down the stairs leading underground. She didn't use the stairs so much as jump down the whole thing.

As she landed, she reached for an inside pocket. Her hand came out with a pistol. The magazine in it was loaded with blanks, but she pulled the trigger anyway.

Bang-bang-bang!! A series of ear-shattering blasts echoed to the end of the underground space.

Upon hearing it, all the passengers in the subway station darted for the exit. They must have thought it was a terrorist or someone firing randomly on people. In a mostly crazed panic, they all vanished from the underground in moments.

Tatemiya and the others have the entrances under control. If the sorcerer is still in the station, we no longer need to worry about getting civilians involved.

Itsuwa tossed her empty pistol aside and regripped her spear. Sorcerers like her could use a spell called Opila to keep people away, but physical methods were sometimes more effective when the situation called for urgency. Especially for Amakusa, which

extracted magical meaning from everyday objects around them—if it would take too long to search for something to fit their conditions, this was the faster method.

After running down a rather long passage, she came to the ticket machines and automatic turnstiles. Itsuwa leaped over the turnstiles like a hurdle and kept running until she got to the subway platform.

She arrived just as Bayloupe was trying to jump off the vacant platform. Her idea was probably to eschew the train entirely and run through the tunnel on foot.

Their gazes met.

"…!!"

"…?!"

In that instant, the first one to move was Bayloupe.

One hand still gripping the rectangular bag, she used her other to swing her spear-like, handlike, four-bladed weapon in a sweeping arc—hurling the giant signboard clutched in its tip at Itsuwa.

The signboard soared over ten meters, but when it reached Itsuwa, it was cut by seven slashes, and its pieces were scattered.

It wasn't an effect from the spear.

She had seven wires strung around her.

"A Scandinavian symbol of superhuman might…," said Itsuwa, readying her spear again and proceeding silently as she carefully gauged the distance. "I was almost fooled by its shape, but its essence isn't that of a spear. From its magical signals, I sense that it belongs to the thunder god Thor, known for his fearless strength. But…"

"Please don't go calling it Mjölnir the thunder hammer or anything. That hammer was used in areas of northern Europe where Crossism didn't exist in order to spread Crossist teachings. Sure, you could use it for quite a few things in modern western sorcery. But that's not what we're using."

Bayloupe grinned.

"Thor's famous for wielding Mjölnir, but just once, the god of thunder used a different weapon. He borrowed it from a certain female giant. We analyzed the anecdote to manufacture these Soul Arms, the Steel Gloves. It's a more fitting weapon for a girl."

"A weapon for a girl…?"

"I'm aware that, unfortunately, all the members of New Light are skinny girls. Maybe you'll understand if I put it this way: Any

Soul Arm made by analyzing Mjölnir would be a little too heavy for us."

Bayloupe pointed the tip of the "glove" forward. When she flicked the lever on the bottom of the handle, the four blades opened like human fingers.

"We don't even believe Thor is a mere 'thunder god' in the first place. We've interpreted Thor's true essence as a god of agriculture and his lightning strikes as a weather-controlling ability possessed by gods of nature's blessings. Even in that sense, though, Mjölnir's 'characteristics' as the weapon of a thunder god are too strong. If we wanted to use the more flexible powers of an agricultural god beyond his mere offensive abilities, we needed to prepare a different weapon."

Itsuwa jutted her spearhead at Bayloupe, carefully gauging the distance.

Meanwhile, Bayloupe continued, "In place of Mjölnir, Thor borrowed a three-piece set: a belt that augmented his physical strength, an iron staff with incredibly potent destructive force, and iron gloves. The purpose of the gloves is largely unknown, but we've interpreted them to be an interface that let him use high-power Soul Arms with precision—but in any case, there is one thing I can say for certain."

She twirled the Steel Glove around, then slammed the four blade edges onto the platform floor.

"We already made the one—wouldn't it be easier to just make the entire set?"

Thump…!! The four blades sank into the tiled floor.

With the Steel Glove still stuck in the floor, she whipped it around in front of her. Like a golf club hitting a sand trap, the Steel Glove sent hundreds of tiny fragments flying toward Itsuwa.

"…!!"

Itsuwa crouched to let the shrapnel go by her and immediately closed in. However, Bayloupe swung the Steel Glove back around with one hand like a tree branch, instantly intercepting her.

It wasn't just a slashing attack.

The Steel Glove was "grabbing" something.

The wind—no, the particles in the air…?!

The instant Itsuwa realized it, the concrete powder right next to

her face expanded with such force, it was like an explosion.

With a roaring *kaboom!!*, both Itsuwa's body and the spear she held at the ready were flung straight to the side. As she dug her heels in to put on the brakes, Bayloupe jumped. Then, from a position about a meter high, with her knees pulled up to her chest, she rotated vertically and dove at Itsuwa.

With the Steel Glove still in her hand.

With all that compressed dust "gripped" in it, just like before.

Not…good…?! The physical strength alone was already a pain to deal with…!!

For an instant, Itsuwa reflexively tried to use her spear to block but immediately loosened up and jumped to the side. The hit would be too heavy to take. Meanwhile, Bayloupe, after spinning twice in the air, swung the Steel Glove down using her centrifugal force. Her physical strength and the dust's power caused the subway station floor to erupt like a volcano.

Itsuwa thought she'd dodged it, but her body spun up off its feet.

Several of the scattered fragments had hit her.

Still, she didn't fall to the floor—like a figure skater who almost failed a jump, she landed on her tiptoes just as Bayloupe "grabbed" the dust in the air and made another swing, this one horizontal.

Itsuwa, on the verge of losing her balance, couldn't immediately back away from it.

All that dust expanded, ballooning out near her like an explosion.

"Guh…aahh, gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

This time, she'd taken a direct hit. It slammed her body off the floor, then sent her flying backward. The hilt of the Friulian spear in her hands broke into little pieces and dispersed around her. Her weapon cartwheeled through the air, the blade cutting into the floor mere inches away from her face.

Bayloupe picked up her rectangular bag in one hand, then slung the Steel Glove back over her shoulder with the other. "I guess that's game, set, match, huh? I'd love to go more, but I'll be using Gjallarhorn now," she said, raising the hand with the bag up and stroking the side of her head as if to check headphones.



She wore the devices on her ears like hearing aids, but they hung behind her ears. Two things that looked like vacuum tubes stuck out of each of them.

"The only traits the Steel Gloves reproduce are the destructive power of the iron staff the female giant used as a weapon, the strength augmentation from the belt, and the applicability represented by 'grabbing.' But by adding 'intelligence' to the mix, I'm the only one in New Light who can be imbued with partial lightning affinity…Using a different method that doesn't involve Mjölnir, unlike Thor. You should stay put unless you want me to reduce you to cinders."

Itsuwa wiped the blood from her lips with the back of her hand, but she couldn't get up.

Bayloupe hefted the rectangular bag again and said, "This thing will change British history. The Royal Family, the Knights, the Puritans, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland…The very United Kingdom itself. But it's not all bad. Sit tight—you'll enjoy the changes to come."

Bag in hand, Bayloupe straddled the Steel Glove like a witch's broom.

She didn't fly through the air.

The end of the Steel Glove—the four blades—grasped the floor. Then, by cleverly moving each individual blade, like using tentacles to prowl across the ground, the Steel Glove with Bayloupe on it jumped down from the platform and swiftly disappeared down the trainless tunnel.

"…Urgh…"

For a few moments, Itsuwa stayed put.

Eventually, she slowly rose, then reached for a microphone used for announcements hanging on a pillar.

Bayloupe, riding the Steel Glove like a witch's broom, with her rectangular bag in one hand and the Glove's base in her other, sped down the train tracks. She was going fast enough to keep pace with cars on the highway.

She slowly let out a breath, shoulders loosening.

…I've escaped danger for now. Lancis is probably fine, but I'm

worried about Florice. Damn it, this is all because that idiot Lesser screwed up…!!

She gave an additional command to the fast-traveling Steel Glove to guide it along the gently curving tunnel. For now, the question was whether to head for a nearby station or look for an employee exit to use. As she was thinking, she was suddenly struck by the feeling that something was wrong.

…It curved?

According to the route map, this rail was a straight line to the next station. There was no route that would curve like this. And there certainly shouldn't have been any forks in the road.

Unconsciously, she stopped the Steel Glove and alighted on the tracks.

She thought for a moment she'd traveled down some weird path, but that wasn't it. This had definitely been a straight line until now. But if that was true, why were the tracks curving? Wait, more importantly, where did these strangely curved tracks even lead to?

Suddenly, a voice interrupted her thoughts.

It came from the speakers installed in the subway tunnel. They were probably used to tell tunnel workers that trains were approaching. A familiar voice came from them.

"…It does no good to explain this now, but did you know that Necessarius's combat personnel are all perfectly geared toward practical skills?"

It was the voice of the girl she'd just fought on the subway station platform earlier.

She didn't know where she was going with this, but she had a bad feeling about it.

Meanwhile, Itsuwa continued over the speakers, *"There are surprisingly many facilities and establishments in London for the purpose of testing the abilities of newly recruited members. Labyrinths full of traps, for example—practice grounds. Now then, I'm sure you already understand where those tracks, which I've magically forced into an unnecessary and extremely unnatural curve, lead?"*

"You didn't…"

Bayloupe was at a loss for words. She was already trapped in the spell.

Now that Bayloupe couldn't move anymore, Itsuwa left her with this:

"…Seriously, please do your best not to die. From what I've heard, that maze's difficulty was misadjusted, and they had to close it off because people kept dying."

12

The latest traps were made to be convenient. Their functions included automatically transporting battered and broken victims through the giant Soul Arm in the form of a labyrinth as well as recovering and sorting any items they may have dropped on the way.

Due to that, Itsuwa was in the subway station's lost articles vault. In plain terms, the room was for gathering things people had forgotten or dropped.

Along with the rectangular bag was a sheet of parchment. On it were the results of the "test subject's" actions in battle and an incredibly objective readout of her "sorcerer combat power rating." It seemed like they were still doing regular tests even now.

She heard a soft rustling.

It came from the ducts near the ceiling. Itsuwa, being a newcomer, didn't really understand, but it probably had something to do with whatever function connected the labyrinth with the lost articles vault. Without thinking anything of it, she went for a peek inside.

"If you hear something unpleasant, ignore it," said a voice suddenly from behind her. "The automatic self-defense system will kick in."

Startled, Itsuwa quickly turned around.

A woman stood there in a black gothic-lolita dress that was beat-up and torn. With blond hair like a lion and characteristically light-brown skin, her name was Sherry Cromwell. The sorcerer was one of Itsuwa's seniors in Necessarius.

"It's a test mechanism originally made to bare its fangs at veteran Necessarius members. It looks like you used it discreetly, but if you slip up, it'll tear you limb from limb."

"…Hah, ah-ha…hah…," laughed Itsuwa nervously in spite of herself.

The rectangular bag New Light's Bayloupe had been carrying like a treasure was stained in places with dark red.

"Don't let it scare you. The test mechanism here is too insane.

They don't use it anymore. The regular tests these days involve being thrown into an empty room for a week and being told to magically create any necessary materials to live, like water and food—that's all."

"Um…That's very much a chilling proposition on its own." Unsure of how to respond, Itsuwa could only give a pained smile. "I'm sorry for calling you at such a late hour."

"Fortunately, I'm not a rule-upholding nun. Set sleeping times don't exist for me."

Sherry originally used a golem for direct combat, but she was also an expert in deciphering magical encryption hidden inside art, handicraft, and Soul Arms, like allegorical paintings or religious sculptures.

She brushed back her already mussed blond hair without a thought. "…I don't care if it helps the Puritans' sorcerers, but I hate that this is benefiting those bastard Knights, too."

"What?"

"Nothing. Sometimes I think about Ellis—ancient history, really—and I can't help myself. I'll concentrate on my job for now. You called me here 'cause there was something you wanted me to see, right?"

"Y-yes."

Itsuwa had called Sherry to have her look at the inner workings of a certain Soul Arm.

Sherry glanced at the rectangular bag sitting on one of the lost articles vault's metal shelves. "That the bag you were talking about?"

"Yes. Could I possibly ask you to analyze it?"

Sherry sniffed at that, then put on a pair of thin gloves as if she was about to handle an antique.

"Harder to create optical illusions with three-dimensional objects than with paintings. You have to build it and cut it without depending on stuff like making things big or small to express perspective. That's why I don't dislike this kind of thing."

"What? Aren't there pieces of 3-D trick art that use a big ball and a small ball to create perspective? You think it's just two balls, but when you change the angle you look at it…That sort of thing."

"Any 3-D object you need to look at from a certain angle isn't that much different from a flat painting. The illusion wouldn't work at every angle, right? It only has two points of view: from the front

and from the side. Frankly, you could already do that kind of art with paintings."

Her fingers ran along the rectangular bag's contours.

The analysis of the sorcerer who specialized in sculptures began.

"…It's made of mainly oak. They cut millimeter-thick pieces of wood, then treated it with smoke to gently curve it. Its structure is complex, but it doesn't use any nails or screws. Maybe the way they built it is like when you weave bamboo baskets or create wooden mosaics. It's put together in a complex way by manual procedure, but that means you could unravel it with manual procedure as well and rebuild it into a different shape…"

"U-um…? And what does that mean exactly?"

"This bag was made to transform." Sherry made a fist and rapped on the rectangular bag's side with her knuckles. "In fact, it wasn't even a bag originally. They took some other object, then folded it up in a systematic way like origami to force it to have a bag's shape. New Light's field of expertise is Scandinavia, right? Which means—"

"Origami? Really?"

As she listened to Sherry's explanation, Itsuwa casually reached out a hand for the surface of the rectangular bag.

When she did, she heard a *clack*.

It was the sound of the key, which nearly broke after being "beaten to a pulp" in the training grounds, unlocking on its own.

A moment later:

"Ah, wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa?!"

With a *pop*, the rectangular bag inflated.

It wasn't on the level of expanding to only two or three times its original size. The conglomeration of wooden material began to tower, changing form and becoming gigantic. It blasted away the shelf it was sitting on, then proceeded to mow down the other shelves lined up like a library, one after another.

When its expansion stopped, the rectangular bag had become a giant boat.

It had a large wooden canoe-like design. It was over ten meters long.

Sherry sighed. "…I get it. You've got Orsola Aquinas–class airheadedness in you."

"Th-that's outrageous!! I may be bad, but not as bad as that

birdbrained sister!!”

Itsuwa denied it in a hurry.

Orsola Aquinas was an expert at decoding encryption in text, but the sister was in any case known as a bouncy, airheaded woman who walked to the beat of her own drum.

Feeling awkward after the lost-and-found-vault fiasco, she looked away from Sherry. “C-come to think of it, you didn’t call Orsola? You’re in different fields, but I thought she specialized in decryption, too.”

“I left her behind so she wouldn’t screw up like this.”

Itsuwa let out a cute (from a man’s point of view), flustered groan.

Sherry, looking fed up with things, glanced at the bag that had changed shape into a giant boat. “…So, its original form was a boat? If it’s out of Norse mythology, maybe Skithblathnir would be a good line of reasoning.”

“Skithblathnir…You mean the boat big enough to let all the Aesir on, including Odin? Yes, the story was that it could be folded small enough to fit inside a bag, but…”

Of course, it probably wasn’t the legendary boat that appeared in the myths…just a Soul Arm named after it. Still, if they’d gone through the trouble to use that story as a reference, there must have been some relation.

“Well, the bag was simply a means of transporting it. Their goal is probably to load something else onto it and bring it somewhere… They did still compare it to a vehicle of the gods, though—what could they want to carry with such an exaggerated boat?”

“…That…must be the center of New Light’s plan,” muttered Itsuwa. Not the bag but what was supposed to be inside—the necessary item for overturning Britain.

As they could see, the rectangular bag was empty on the inside, but their goal couldn’t have been just to carry the boat. New Light had “mined” some sort of item in Scotland, so Itsuwa had predicted bringing that into London was the core of their scheme, but…

Nevertheless, Bayloupe being a decoy for her other comrades… didn’t make sense to her, either.

“The sorcerer who had this never let go of the bag, even while she was fighting me. If it was just a decoy for insurance, I don’t think she would have risked fighting with just one hand and tried to protect it to the death…If she were to die along with her decoy,

everything would be lost."

The parchment spit out by the "training grounds" with the bag had a record of the "test subject's" actions and combat. As far as she could tell from that, even after Bayloupe's Steel Glove was smashed, the girl had continued to protect the rectangular bag right up until she lost consciousness…No matter how Itsuwa tried to wrap her mind around it, that wasn't the way you would treat a dummy.

"Which means there's still a secret. Some secret about this empty bag that meant she had to risk life and limb to protect it."

Sherry took several things out of her pocket—a small brush, a magnifying glass—making it look like she was going to dig up fossils. She seemed to be interested enough in the item to research it for real now.

"Well, it can't just be a jack-in-the-box, can it? I'll see what I can find regarding its detailed effects as a Soul Arm, but no guarantee I'll find something right away. I think Agnes and the others are snooping around New Light's hideouts in Edinburgh. Might be faster to go with them."

"A-all right then. Please excuse me."

"Right." Sherry nodded casually, not turning around to look at her. "You get aboveground and take out the rest of the trash."

Itsuwa bowed to her again and left the lost articles vault.

She ran through the subway station premises, heading for the exit, and meanwhile got in touch with Agnes just in case via cell phone (strictly speaking, not using phone lines but using a magical method).

Instead of the small speaker in the phone, her cell phone charm vibrated, creating the voice of the recipient—Agnes, who was currently investigating in Edinburgh, Scotland.

"I'm sorry, but no. We're looking into things now, but we haven't even found info on something called Skithblathnir. We'll begin a more focused search along those lines soon."

"I…see. Thank you for your help," she answered, running up the stairs to the surface.

"Anyway, we finally took one down? According to our intel, New Light is a four-person group. If there are still three out there, things are a little dicey, to be honest."

"Actually, I have good news regarding that."

Just as she said that, it happened.

Something shot right by Itsuwa's side. A thundering *craaaack*

rang out. When she looked in that direction, she saw a girl stuck in a giant signboard. She'd flown twenty meters through the air, the wreckage of her wing-shaped Soul Arm scattering about, until she'd crashed into it.

As Itsuwa watched the now completely unconscious girl, she said:

"Two to go."

When she looked in the opposite direction from where the girl was buried, she saw their Priestess, Kaori Kanzaki, returning her long katana sheath to its original position. She must have used it to knock the girl away as hard as she could. The physical strength of a saint, one of less than twenty in the world, was far beyond anything the Steel Glove could handle.

Itsuwa ended the call, picked up the new rectangular bag from the road, then began to walk over to Kanzaki and the other Amakusa members following her.

"I…I see there wasn't only one bag."

"Yes. If we decide that nothing in it is the thing they actually needed, we will have to look elsewhere. As I thought, we can't rest easy until we stop them all—though I'd prefer to avoid violent methods."

13

On the roof of an extravagantly furnished horse-drawn carriage, a lamp emitting a soft light shook slightly.

About one hundred kilometers from central London, on a dark road without even a streetlight, the carriage ran. And it wasn't alone. With a particularly large one at the center, over ten others were driving in a line from front to back. Apart from the carriages, knight horses fitted with ritual armor added to the convoy as well.

It was a scene out of a picture book or fairy tale, but contrary to the antique appearance, their speed was over five hundred kilometers per hour. It wasn't due to the capabilities of each individual vehicle but magic circles in the road, constructed at even intervals way back when the pathway was first built. From afar, the carriage convoy may have looked like a linear motorcade with lights on it.

Each vehicle in the gold-plated and rare-metal-decorated convoy gave off its own unreal radiance, but what stood out the most was the large carriage in the center, on the move while guarded by a phalanx of people.

It was commonly known as the Mobile Fortress.

A long-distance escort carriage used by the British royal family.

It had a license plate so it could drive on public roads, and its wheels and wooden frame strength had been adjusted. At the same time, it was aggressively protected by over seven hundred Soul Arms and magic circles.

Riding inside the carriage, decorated like a fairy-tale vehicle, were three women.

The second princess, Carissa; the third princess, Vilian; and Index.

"…Guess our sister didn't come after all," muttered Carissa, looking out the window.

She'd let her dress skirt expand to the limit, taking up the space normally reserved for three people. In contrast, Vilian was scrunching up her clothes as much as she could, forced to feel small in a space for half a person.

In a nervous tone, Vilian said, "She is rather untrusting of others."

"Rather untrusting? More like staunchly untrusting. Even with a carriage strong enough to withstand someone throwing the sun at it for three days, we still can't get rid of all the risks?"

"That's exactly why, isn't it?" replied Vilian. "She absolutely never trusts any security she didn't make herself. There's no room for her when they've already prepared every last detail. And she can't personally verify it, either, which is why she can't trust it… You know the story of how she cut off her private room in our other home, Windsor Castle, and remade it into something she liked?"

"Well, she *does* raise pets for their 'taste,' so…That said, she's also constantly sneaking out of the palace to visit places nearby."

"She said there's no malice in the words of people who don't know who she is, didn't she?"

"Hmm." Carissa sighed. "Right now, I guess the Eurotunnel is more important than her." She glanced at Index, who was letting her legs swing with nothing to do. "The Curtana Second protects our nation, but it doesn't mean our nation is guaranteed to prosper forever. We likened the angelic leader to the king or queen, the

angelic army to the knights, and then we subdued the masses, but if those same masses rise up against us, the nation will lose its ability to function…And we can't rely on a great flood purging us all again, like in the Bible."

"…"

"Preventing a crisis like that is why we've got the Knights acting in the public eye, with the Puritans behind the scenes cleaning up the stragglers, each doing their own job to keep the peace…But now we have the Eurotunnel bombing and the attempted terror incident on a passenger plane…These problems coming at us one after another were far more than enough to shake the hearts of our people."

"But…," said Vilian, choosing her words carefully, "even if France is involved in this string of incidents, they must have the Roman Orthodox Church's influence behind them. What would you say blaming only France would accomplish?"

"Maybe you're right, but regardless of who was the mastermind, we need to force France to yield." Carissa folded her arms. "The Vatican is well guarded. We can't conquer it in a single day, so we'll need to prepare for a protracted conflict and construct front-line supply bases. Which would just leave the geographical issue. We need France to cooperate with us by any means necessary so that we can build bases a stone's throw away from the Vatican."

"I-it doesn't have to be France, does it? Don't we also have the option of building a large-scale resupply base that can serve the Mediterranean, just to apply pressure to them?"

"France is the one who would have to protect the Mediterranean in that case. It doesn't change the fact that we need to silence them…Not only that, but the sea fortress would have to keep watch over both the skies and the seas, so I can't say it's a very realistic option. There's also the problem of how sturdy it would be.

"With land bases, if a wall gets broken, you can just patch it up, but one hole on the sea will get you sunk," added Carissa.

Vilian frowned in unease and put her hands to her chest. "…To request aid from France…is there really no other option than to use military action?"

"If you seriously want it to be otherwise, you have to think of concrete methods," noted Carissa.

Vilian looked up while Carissa spoke.

"Our sister is the brains; I'm the military might; and you're the

virtuous. I ended up naturally only able to think up forceful methods, but you might be able to find a more efficient way…And possibly not only with France but with the Roman Orthodox Church as well."

"Carissa…"

"And investigating the cause of the Eurotunnel bombing is necessary to gather information on how to do that, too. If you want to lead us to the best solution, brace yourself. We're almost at Folkestone. And that means the Eurotunnel terminal connecting to Dover isn't far, either."

14

Touma Kamijou raced through late-night London.

He wasn't doggedly chasing the girl Lesser—he didn't know the member of New Light's name, though. He was dashing straight down small roads nestled between buildings.

Overhead, shrill noises moved through the night.

They were the burglar alarms set up in all the buildings. Even now, as Lesser jumped from third-floor window to fourth-floor window, she was breaking the glass. Since that was setting off the alarms one after another, it would have seemed from afar that the sound itself was moving along in a clump.

They seemed to be uninhabited business buildings, so he didn't hear any distressed cries or shouts, but the girl probably wasn't paying attention to that. She also didn't appear to be using anything like Opila. She'd probably charge on through even if yells or screams rang out.

Gah!! She's so crude! Certainly doesn't look like a sorcerer on a secret mission!! he shouted to himself in complaint, running ever farther.

And then something unusual occurred.

Before he knew it, something was there, traveling parallel to him.

It was a small orange pumpkin.

About the size of a clenched fist, it had eyes and a mouth carved into it. It was running along a nearby wall, staying at eye level with Kamijou.

"Sir, you don't appear to be either a sorcerer or British. Why might you be following me, of all people?"

The words, spoken in a joking tone, belonged to a young girl.

She continued, purposely speaking Japanese for him. *"Well, sorry if you're someone who moved to Japantown, but you're not, are you? I can tell by how you smell. You don't seem like you know all that much about Britain."*

"…Are you with New Light?!"

"Bull's-eye. I'm Lesser, from New Light. The fact that you're fighting alongside the 0th parish, the fact that you know our name…Huh. If you were a regular person, I would have warned you to go home this instant. What should I do about this?"

Her words sounded worried, but there was no depth to them. Kamijou gritted his teeth. She was completely making fun of him.

"In any event, it doesn't matter whether or not you're a sorcerer. You're not British, which means you're out. You don't have the qualifications for this. Go home this instant instead of sticking your nose in weird places."

"Qualifications?! What are you talking about?!" Kamijou's angry shout rang through the narrow path.

The pumpkin, meanwhile, answered him as though it were a guide giving him directions. *"Just what I said. We're carrying all this insanity out as representatives of the sorcerers who live in Britain so that we can lead the country in a better direction. If someone shows up to stand in our way, they at the very least have to love Britain as much as we do, or why bother fighting? This isn't the sort of problem some random tourist should be sticking his nose in."*

"Don't give me that crap! I know you mined up a weird Soul Arm in Scotland and brought it to London! You're clearly doing something bad! I can't just leave you be!!"

"I don't know what to say. Is that what the 0th parish's analysis decided? Anyway, it would be pretty dumb to give the enemy any hints, so I guess they can go ahead and think that if they want."

"What…are you talking about?"

"You don't need to understand. All I can say is that Britain will lose for certain over the course of the 'war,' and we want to veer it in a different direction at the very last moment. That's all."

The existence of the Soul Arm they mined. The girl's words, which didn't deny the fact that they'd brought it into London and planned to activate it…

…Nobody knew in concrete terms what sort of scheme New Light had put together, but it certainly couldn't be anything good.

“In any event, unless you’re a citizen of Britain, you probably can’t get a real sense of how urgent this problem is. I don’t exactly want to go ahead and kill someone who’s not an obvious bad guy. You seem like the kind of guy who would get mad while staring at something burning on a faraway shore, so I’d like it if you would stay quiet.”

As her words ended, the pumpkin popped. Like a confetti-shooting party toy, the pumpkin spewed paper streamers of all different colors, which Kamijou punched away with his right hand, knowing it wouldn’t do anything but hit it anyway.

Damn it! She’s not just quick to flee—she’s got a perfect read on the route I’m using to follow her, even though she shouldn’t be able to see me!! I just hope Oriana’s all right!!

Kamijou, clicking his tongue in frustration, burst out of the small street onto a major road. It was large, with three lanes on either side. It was almost midnight now, but there were still quite a few cars on their way home and late-night buses coming and going.

Then Kamijou stopped moving.

As his soles scraped along the ground to stop him, he glanced at the corner of a building.

A window on the third floor.

Bang!! Lesser hit her hands against the reinforced glass. Her shocking ability to jump was something to be proud of, but even if she was good at jumping up from below, she didn’t seem able to jump down from above and neutralize the impact.

And she didn’t have enough jumping power to leap across the six-lane road in one go.

Lesser was at a dead end, so to speak, and even more hardship awaited her.

Whump!!

Oriana caught up to her from behind and delivered a rock-hard drop kick to the girl’s back.

The reinforced glass shattered and Lesser was flung out into the air.

Oriana’s plan had been this:

I’ll throw her out of a building onto a main road, so you make sure to catch her on the ground.

Kamijou spread his arms wide and shouted, “Ha-ha-ha!! *Dead or aaaaaarrested!!*”

"…?!" Lesser was dumbfounded, but she couldn't do anything in midair.

But that was when Kamijou realized: As the girl's small body fell, so did a rain of hundreds of glittering glass fragments.

"I…I'm gonna die, gonna die gonna die gonna die gonna die gonna die gonna die!!"

<"Don't cower like that!! If you don't catch me, I'm going to die!!"> shouted Lesser in English. She swung around her four-bladed spear—the Steel Glove. When its tip struck the side of the building, there was a massive *bang*, and Lesser's body surged sideways.

After crashing directly into a pile of Halloween decorations between two street-side trees, she kept falling downward, crushing and cracking all the decorations underneath her. It seemed to have cushioned her fall; while her clothing was torn in places, she accurately landed on the ground, turned her back to Kamijou, and began to run again.

As Kamijou stood there flabbergasted, Oriana poked her head out of the broken third-story window. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted:

"Youuuuuuuuu faaaaaaaaaaaaaaail!!"

"Well, sorry!! I'll get back to chasing her, jeez!!"

With a tear or two appearing at the corners of his eyes out of fear of the glass rain, Kamijou followed behind Lesser.

15

Agnes Sanctis was in Scotland, in the northern part of the United Kingdom.

She was at a yacht harbor in the capital, Edinburgh. High waves had trouble forming here, located in the bay as it was, so it was valued as a place to keep your yacht or cruiser safe for long periods of time.

Agnes was on a boat.

But she wasn't on the sea.

In front of the yacht harbor was a large, asphalt square. Lined up along it were cruisers beaten up by the elements. They pulled onto land anything that had deteriorated to the point where holes prevented it from floating on the water.

Most of the cruisers here were either waiting to be dismantled

or belonged to a rank-and-file employee who bought it on the cheap, keeping it there until they could repair it.

"That's the third place, is it?" muttered Agnes.

Lucia, a nun and her colleague, said, "…It's no longer seaworthy, but the living space has been kept clean. We also found a security system shared with the previous two hideouts. This must be a New Light base, as we thought."

Agnes narrowed her eyes. Most advanced sorcerers—ones who lived in modern times—didn't build things like extravagant castles or towers. If they devoted all their energies to one place, they'd lose everything if it was raided. Instead, they prepared several places, like apartments, rooms in multipurpose buildings, and campers: bases they could easily abandon at any time. By dividing their finances, they could keep the risks manageable.

New Light understood that unwritten rule.

That was a blunt indication that these girls were more than just interested in telling fortunes—they were powerful, a bona fide sorcerer's society.

They'll be a pain to deal with…Agnes sighed, then asked Lucia, "Is there any information left inside? Details about the bags they're using—Skithblathnir—or their plans for them?"

"They seem to have things set up to erase sources of information in all their bases with one remote signal, following common practice. Sisters Catherine and Agatha are currently investigating the interior in more detail, but—"

"Sister Agnes!"

A hatch directly attached to the cruiser's floor opened upward. A nun with glasses, Agatha, poked her face out and beckoned for them.

"We discovered a prototype bag in the engine room," said Agatha. "Considering how they failed to directly destroy the Soul Arm, they probably didn't stop by here, only destroyed the information remotely in a hurry. This seems to indicate the possibility of some irregular factor having sped up their plans."

"And the bag?" asked Agnes. "Do we know Skithblathnir's effects as a Soul Arm?"

"We have no proof, so I can't give any guarantees, but according to what we could analyze…" Agatha flipped through a notepad in her hand. "It seems to allow free teleportation of an object inside Bag A to Bag B, Bag C, or Bag D. Its range is

approximately one hundred kilometers. They can pass the item to anyone as long as they're in that range."

"I see…They're trying to get right to the heart of London while passing some kind of crucial item among the four of them like a game of lacrosse."

Agnes didn't know what the "crucial item" was, but it was important enough to warrant preparing a Soul Arm like this. Doubtlessly it was "crucial" in the bad sense.

"Ordinarily, it would be a replacement for a bomb or weapon, right?"

"We'll have to look into that as well."

Of the four New Light members, two had already retired thanks to Amakusa. But as long as they could freely pass the Skithblathnir's "contents" between them, it was extremely likely that any of them could activate whatever those contents were.

While receiving a written report from the nun Angeline beside her, Agnes said, "…According to the information we nabbed from the two previous hideouts, New Light was conducting some kind of excavation near Edinburgh. Whatever they got is probably this 'no-good item.'"

"Sister Agnes! It's an emergency!"

Then she heard Catherine open the door connecting to the living block and shout to her. Agnes looked over as Catherine threw her a rolled-up piece of parchment. Agnes unfurled it and froze in surprise.

"…This can't be…"

16

Touma Kamijou ran down a back road.

He knew he'd be up a creek if Lesser made another one of her astonishing high jumps again, but something seemed to be malfunctioning on her end. The roadside tree had served as a cushion, but she probably couldn't have landed unharmed.

Right now, with her clear, metal-spine-filled, tubelike tail swinging left and right behind her, she was running down the street like a normal person. She was far from your average girl, though. It was like she took the speed of a short-distance sprinter and used that pace to run a marathon.

It must have taken Oriana time to get down from the building;

she wasn't nearby.

If he lost sight of the girl here, it would really be over.

As Kamijou's tension grew with every corner Lesser turned, he heard his cell phone's ringtone. When he looked at the screen, he saw an unfamiliar caller. It wasn't even one he'd ever see in Japan, either, given the first few numbers.

Still running, he answered the call and heard the familiar voice of a girl.

"Thank goodness, I got through! It was the right move wringing information out of Amakusa!!"

"Agnes…?"

He wanted to ask why Amakusa had his phone number, but Agnes's tone sounded too urgent for her to answer a question like that.

"We discovered part of New Light's objective! Their ultimate goals are the princesses of Britain who went to the Folkestone tunnel terminal to investigate the Eurotunnel!!"

"Are you serious…?" Kamijou tensed.

"Buckingham Palace isn't fitted with a magical security system for diplomatic reasons. But the truth is, it's still guarded by many knights and sorcerers…and above all, the strength of Her Majesty herself. The princesses' leaving the palace by carriage was a perfect chance for New Light!!"

The assassination of Britain's princesses.

Something cold ran down Kamijou's spine as Agnes continued. *"That isn't the only problem. The British royal family is denying this officially, but given the existence of the Curtana Second, they have one fear: that there is a large-scale spell for which someone in the royal house is the activation key."*

By "someone in the royal house," Agnes seemed to mean it wasn't a simple matter of bloodline—it was anyone who had been integrated into the framework of the British royal family by magic. The family had connections to leading figures in various countries through affairs such as political marriages; it didn't seem like Agnes could explain this by referring to only "those of the royal bloodline."

If being in the royal house or not was only based on bloodline, then if an originally foreign princess became the queen and thus part of the royal family, she would end up being the only one who couldn't use the royal family's magic.

"There are a bunch of rumors about what the spell really is that needs someone from the royal house as an activation key, but…The most extreme of them is a large-scale spell that uses the person's death as a trigger."

"What…the hell?"

"The rumor has been around for a while, but…Broadly speaking, it's one of the strongest attack spells in Britain, which will cause ultimate destruction on a national level. It was deployed around the sixteenth century, and of course, the enemies they had in mind were European countries. They say when activated, it would almost completely wipe those regions off the map."

Agnes's words didn't feel real to Kamijou anymore. She told him it was possible this was an exaggerated rumor…but that didn't make him feel any better about it.

"But if they activated such an insanely powerful spell, Britain would face diastrophism and disasters…It would be a literal final attack that doesn't take what happens afterward into account whatsoever. Maybe it's like firing a super-powerful magnum with one hand. It's all still rumor, but they say as soon as it activates, most British citizens would die from the recoil and aftereffects."

If that information was correct…

Then New Light's goal was—

"One of them said something along the lines of…if you're not someone who can risk your life for Britain, you don't have any right to be part of the battle, or something."

"That goes to show how serious they are about assassinating the princesses. As well as the sorcery that will be unleashed upon their death."

A chill ran up Kamijou's spine. Hurriedly, he said, "Wait. The British royal family has been going for centuries, right? Lots of kings and queens have died in that time, haven't they? If there really was a large-scale spell like that, shouldn't it have already wiped out Britain and Europe a long time ago?!"

"In Crossism, there's a sacrament called the Final Anointing. Broadly speaking, it's a sort of ceremony where you prepare someone to receive the final judgment to send them to Heaven after they die…Could it be that also works as an avoidance code? Historically, all the royalty who have died in their castle or were executed there have had the Final Anointing sacrament administered to them. But if something else happened…A sudden death in battle or successful assassination that

didn't give time for someone to administer the Final Anointing…"

"Then the royal spell on this country would activate…"

The death of a king meant the death of a country.

They had to avenge that death, even if it meant using an assembly of all their strength in one final attack.

If the sorcery from that time period was still functional…

Kamijou imagined it and shuddered.

Hastily, he searched for a reason to deny it. New Light had attached the Soul Arm they used for communication to the royal carriage, but that didn't mean the assassination would succeed right away.

"That's right. A princess wouldn't go out unarmed! I don't know about regular people, but aren't the cars and planes and stuff that presidents use specially made?!"

"Yes, the carriage has so many security systems installed that they call it the Mobile Fortress. But the communicator they put on it seems to be able to know not only the carriage's location but also whether the doors are closed…"

"So when the princess gets out of the car herself, some kind of attack will go off…?" Kamijou said to himself, feeling a shiver run down his spine. "Doesn't the vehicle have any escorts?!"

"It does, of course…But their security layout is probably based on the carriage's defensive functions working properly. If the basis is wrong, even a perfect system will show holes. If they did something like sniper her through that net from afar…"

"Shit," Kamijou swore. "A communicator…How did they put something like that on the queen's carriage?"

"We don't know how they pulled it off. And if they got the communicator on, we can't be sure they didn't plant some other traps… Like one to temporarily weaken the carriage's magical defenses."

"…This is the worst," moaned Kamijou. Index, of course, was traveling with the princesses.

"We still don't know how they plan to attack. Is London nothing more than a shortcut to get to the tunnel terminal in Folkestone, or can they fire some kind of long-range attack? Whatever the case is, please arrest their members quickly!"

Kamijou stared at Lesser's back as she ran away. "Isn't there a member we haven't found yet?!"

"New Light has four people in it, and we've already taken down two. That leaves the one you're following and the last one, whose

location is unknown. But we discovered how the Skithblathnir works earlier. Their ability to move around should weaken if they're not all doing this together."

Agnes explained the Soul Arm effects of the rectangular bags she called Skithblathnir. Apparently, it was an item that let you transfer the contents from one rectangular bag to another, whenever you wanted.

"There are two enemies left. One of them should have the real thing in their possession."

Even if Lesser, the one Kamijou was chasing, had the "contents," she would just pass it to the last member if she got cornered.

Which meant…

"Yeah, if they go down to one person, it'll stop them from passing it along, but it won't stop the actual assassination!! As long as they have those contents, anyone would be able to do the real attack whenever, wouldn't they?!"

"Yes. In the end, we won't be able to rest until we've smoked each of them out and arrested them all. So hurry!"

Kamijou ended the call, shoved the phone in his pocket, and set his sights in front of him again.

Then Lesser turned a corner, and when Kamijou followed—she was suddenly not there.

?! For a moment, he thought his heart would stop, but he recovered immediately.

There was an emergency staircase going up the side of a building.

When he looked up, he heard the *plat-plat* sound of someone running up the metal stairs growing more distant.

"Up, huh?"

After taking a moment to catch his breath, he dashed up the stairs. The building was about five stories high. Along the staircase, the fourth-story door was open. Climbing the stairs that were like an ever-turning dance floor made him dizzy, but he shot up the steps in one sprint.

Creak.

Suddenly, four blades that shone the color of silver appeared.

Lesser had shoved the blades between the metal emergency staircase and the brick wall, forcing their connection apart.

"Th…this can't be…?!"

The bolts in one part broke, and the entire staircase swayed violently. The heavy shake made bolts on the other floors begin to pop off like buttons on a shirt. Kamijou quickly grabbed the railing, but the whole staircase began to tip over. It wouldn't hold.

But…

After tilting about fifteen degrees, the emergency staircase abruptly stopped. He looked to see that it had originally been installed in a narrow alley, so a spot near the top of the staircase had run into the building next door.

"…!!" Lesser saw it, too, and tried to use her Steel Glove to attack again.

But before she could, Kamijou moved. He got up onto the railing of the diagonal staircase, ignoring the stairs, and made a big jump toward where Lesser was on the fourth story. Just as he did, the staircase buckled under its own weight, collapsing and beginning to fall toward the ground.

"You little!!" As Kamijou approached, Lesser made a swift stab with the Steel Glove.

But she didn't know.

His right hand had a power called the Imagine Breaker in it.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

As he fell, he swung his fist down directly onto the tip of Lesser's Steel Glove, shattering the four blades and blowing them away. Before she had time to be shocked, Lesser collided with him, which ended up sending her flying.

Behind them, the emergency staircase made a huge crashing sound as it completely collapsed.

Kamijou, having lost his balance and rolled onto the floor, panted as he got up.

In front of him, Lesser, even without her weapon, didn't let go of the rectangular bag at her side.

Lesser glanced around in search of an escape route, but Kamijou spoke first, interrupting her. "It's over."

"…"

"You don't have the strength to run with the speed from before. Plus, you don't have that weird, crazy-strong spear weapon anymore…I think even my fist would beat you down now."

Lesser cast a baleful glance toward the elevator, but then it became clear that her defeat was assured. Oriana appeared from the elevator as though following the commotion.

Surrounded, with her exit blocked, Lesser breathed a short sigh.

Then she threw open a nearby door and dove into the room on the other side—but there would be no exit there. Kamijou and Oriana exchanged nods and entered.

This seemed to be a multipurpose building; the room was an office space. It was a little surreal to see the typical steel desks and copy machines sitting in an attractive brick building.

Lesser was near the window.

But she didn't have it in her to jump down. She knew that if she did, she wouldn't be walking away.

"We know what you're after," said Kamijou. "It looks like you were targeting the princess who left Buckingham Palace, but it also looks like you failed. We caught the others already."

"Heh," Lesser tossed over her shoulder. She responded in Japanese for him: "But you don't know where Lancis is, do you?"

"…"

"The answer is simple. Lancis isn't even in London right now."

Kamijou's spine froze.

For a moment, he imagined the last New Light member already having gotten through London, heading for Folkestone, where the princesses were.

But the answer was different.

"Lancis is awaiting instructions about thirty kilometers north of London. The three of us are her 'relays.' All we needed to do was to each get the right distance away, knowing the royal family carriage's location. It didn't matter which one of us she went through—*our plan would still succeed.*"

"What…are you saying…?" Kamijou frowned.

But then Oriana suddenly looked up. The courier must have realized something. "Relays…Wait!!"

As Oriana hastily tried to get a flashcard ready, Lesser hummed a haughty laugh at them.

And smiling, she said:

"If you knew we produced a lot of them, why didn't you think of the possibility that there'd be a fifth Skithblathnir?!"

Lesser held her rectangular bag aloft.

Then some sort of blue laser came through the wall and pierced the bag. The ray of light changed direction there, as if refracting,

then shot off toward a different location.

From what Agnes had told him, the Skithblathnir's effective range was one hundred kilometers. It would reach Folkestone from here.

But…

…This Lancis person must have just sent this bag the contents.

"Who did you send the contents to? Who the hell has the fifth bag?!"

Kamijou tried to grab the bag in spite of himself, but Lesser tossed it aside, its purpose served, and spread her arms out wide. As he glared at her, she spoke.

"…I achieved my goal, but I also lost the game. There's not much point in my annoying the forward player of your little alliance simply because I don't like the result."

This time, her smile was the resigned sort.

"I'll accept my loss. If you're going to silence me, now's your best chance."

Kamijou saw a speck of light in the nightscape flare outside the window.

He immediately stepped forward and tried to shove Lesser out of the way, but as he grabbed her arm, something happened.

The glass window behind Lesser shattered, and bright red blood splattered.

"A sniper?!" shouted Oriana.

Without Kamijou needing to pull her down, the impact sent Lesser spinning and crashing into the ground. Possibly because he'd grabbed her arm, the aim had been off, if only slightly. Still, whatever it was that struck her in the shoulder had nearly torn her arm off. An unbelievable amount of blood flowed from the wound—had it sliced an artery?

"Get down, stupid!!"

Despite the warning, Kamijou couldn't move.

They want to silence her.

If that was true, whoever did this certainly wasn't trying to support Kamijou.

The attack was clearly malevolent.

"Shit!!"

Finally able to move, Kamijou looked around and spotted a

sheaf of printer paper. He grabbed some, rolled it up into a ball, and pressed it against the wound. Because of the sudden blood loss, Lesser began to have convulsions. She was going into shock.

Things would really be bad at this rate.

"Oriana, call an ambulance!! Wait, don't you have any healing spells in your repertoire?!"

"Unfortunately…," said Oriana regretfully.

Then she suddenly froze.

The "thing" that had shot through the window and pierced Lesser's shoulder had gotten stuck in a steel desk in the office. It was a rod, about thirty centimeters long, one half of it an aerodynamic arrowhead shape—a unique projectile.

Its destructive force wasn't what surprised Oriana.

She was surprised because she'd seen it before.

"…Robin Hood…"

"What?!"

"It's a Soul Arm the Knight Faction uses for long-distance sniping. But the Puritans are supposed to have jurisdiction over magical incidents in Britain. Nobody told me the Knights were working with them."

Oriana plucked the projectile out of the desk. As she ran her finger over its surface, she muttered, "Robin Hood was developed by a team directly under the second princess, Carissa, famous for her military acumen…If that team is involved in silencing New Light, that means…But that can't be…?!"

Next to Oriana, Kamijou's body tensed.

The reason was Lesser.

With him holding all that paper to her wound, maybe in a bragging mood because she'd beaten him or out of some emotion caused by his first aid, she moved her trembling lips and whispered:

"…What we were transporting was the Curtana Original…"

And then she grinned.

Grinned as her face was spattered all over with blood.

"…The sword of mercy, the ceremonial sword for coronations lost to history, which only the royal house can use…And of course…they made a successor, which the current queen has…but this is far stronger than the Curtana Second…It's the strongest Soul Arm in the United Kingdom…and a perfectly fitting sword to change Britain…"

17

Folkestone.

A port town about one hundred kilometers from London. This was the location of the British-side terminal to the seafloor railroad tunnel that crossed the Dover Strait—the Eurotunnel.

Countless horse-drawn carriages were parked near the terminal, veiled in the dark of night. One was the royal family's, and the others were its escorts. Several other military horses were resting as well, with dozens of knights clad in silvery armor waiting nearby.

There was no light at the entrance.

The terminal's power wasn't currently operating because of the explosion midway along the seafloor tunnel and because Index was headed there. The third princess, Vilian, standing a few steps away, took a thermos of black tea from a young servant.

That was when the Knight Leader's eyebrow twitched.

He glanced at the rectangular bag in his hand.

After testing the bag's weight, he quietly went over to the second princess. Still holding the bag, he whispered into Carissa's ear:

"(It has been delivered.)"

"I see." The second princess smiled thinly.

The Knight Leader continued, his voice low enough that only she could hear. "From communications intercepted both electronically and magically…The Puritans seem to have misunderstood…and believe that New Light's assassination of a princess will automatically trigger a large-scale, anti-Europe attack spell cast on the entire British territory."

"Hmph. What a shady-sounding legend. It's obviously not real."

"Yes. If we could prepare such high-powered sorcery, negotiations would have proceeded more easily. After all, it's a plan to ensure our people don't die so easily."

After hearing her right-hand man's words, Carissa's smile deepened. And as it did, she said:

"Inform all knights hidden around Britain."

That was the signal.

The single instruction, given to burn a certain nation to a crisp from within.

"Begin the invasion. The kingmaking blade Curtana Original is

in our hands. I, Carissa, will now assume the position of the United Kingdom's head of state. Anyone who does not want to let Britain rot away with the *former* Pacifist Queen should rise up of their own will. In order to start Britain anew, level as much as necessary—and destroy as much as necessary."

CHAPTER 4

The Sword Brings War and Calamity
Sword_of_Mercy.

1

Midnight.

As the date changed, it happened.

For example:

Cities all over Northern Ireland, like Belfast, Enniskillen, and Londonderry, found their main facilities, like city hospitals and police stations, blockaded by leagues of police officers and soldiers. They were Knights and Royal Family groups backed by the second princess's faction. The unusual atmosphere caused the citizens to either remain in their houses out of fear or be arrested by the police if they let their curiosity get the better of them.

For example:

Mints that manufactured Scotland's own currency and religious bases like the Holyrood Palace were seized by the very security officers and knights who were supposed to be protecting them. Agnes's unit, as it did its investigation at the yacht harbor in Edinburgh, was eventually surrounded by a group of knights who outnumbered them.

For example:

Castles of every sort in Wales—Cardiff Castle, Swansea Castle, Oystermouth Castle, Conwy Castle, Penrhyn Castle, Beaumaris

Castle, Caernarfon Castle—fell one after another into the hands of the Knight Faction. Along with local governments and courts, needless to say.

For example:

The Knight Faction's hands reached to the center of England, to London and its outskirts as well. In fact, the Knights were most numerous in England. They captured religious bases like St. George's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey and set foot into one key political point after another like Buckingham Palace and the Parliament building.

Of course, the Puritan Faction's sorcerers—including the members of Necessarius—hadn't simply rolled over at the invasion.

Wales.

There were many castles and forts in this region. Military installations built out of stone, constructed for various purposes for various people, some as bases of operations to attack the land or as important locations to defend it. And now they'd all been commandeered by a single faction—

The Knights.

"*Hff, hff*…Blast!!"

A nun ran through the night, her breathing shallow. She had been placed in charge of caring for the chapel installed in the castle by the Knights. The first ones to find themselves in desperate straits after the second princess, Carissa, had begun her invasion with the Curtana Original in hand were the nuns like her, on official business for the Puritan Faction and assigned to castles and forts. Everyone had basically pointed a weapon at her all at once and from all directions.

How dare they threaten me with their blades? What's happened to the Knights?!

She was at an overwhelming numerical disadvantage. She'd have to assemble enough manpower for "organized combat" in order to overturn the situation.

Blast! she swore as she ran. *One at a time, I might have been able*

to manage, but this…!! She wasn't thinking about killing any fully equipped knights; there wasn't even the slightest intention of fighting knights who borrowed the Curtana Original's power—despite it only working in the United Kingdom—and wielded partially angelic powers.

But if she had used all the sorcery at her disposal, she should have been able to buy some time. She should have at least been able to distract them—had she only one opponent.

Stalling for time was a tactic for stopping an enemy's movements and only for a short while. If a newcomer appeared from somewhere else while she had one tied down, and then while she was dealing with the second, the first was restored to action…It would be pointless to keep repeating that.

For now, I'll join the sisters stationed at the other castles! After we assemble our forces, we can drag them into a battle between groups! Or at the very least, use our organized combat to give ourselves an effective retreat…!!

That was when it happened.

Suddenly, silver armor appeared beside her.

It was a pursuer from the Knights. It seemed they'd been ordered to capture and not kill, but there was no guarantee what would be awaiting her after that.

"!!" The nun removed a compass from her sleeve. Cardinal directions heavily influenced her spellcasting; she threw a card north, as defined by the device. From it, she tried to draw a bundle of light…

Nothing's…coming out…?!

She grimaced. Her spell had failed…When she thought about why, she realized the power that made the compass needle work—magnetism itself—had been interfered with from elsewhere.

In other words, her compass hadn't been pointing north.

Without knowing that, she'd thrown the card in the direction the needle was aiming at, so of course the spell didn't go off.

"Oh n—"

Taking advantage of the time lost from her misfire, arms clad in silver steel reached for the nun.

Near the island of Islay in the Atlantic.

A fortress came out of the black midnight seas and floated

about twenty meters into the air.

Dubbed the Coven Compass, the mobile fortress was a giant stone disc, the outline of which measured approximately two hundred meters in radius and ten meters in thickness. On the disc's surface, as implied from its name, were sharp lines running from the middle to each cardinal direction—but that wasn't the essence of the place.

The essence lay on the underside.

There, dozens—no, *hundreds*—of loose ropes hung about the disc. And on each of those ropes sat a witch bearing a broomstick. They looked like migratory birds perched for a few moments' rest, but they were all ready for battle.

The women had painted their old broomsticks with a kind of herbal medicine.

Witches didn't ride brooms; they rode around on any item imbued with flight by their herbs. As long as they had the plants, they could manipulate tools other than broomsticks as well.

…Well, call them a witch's drug, but all we do is combine a variety of magical herbs. We obviously don't do anything like boiling unbaptized infants in cauldrons.

One of the witches waiting on a rope, Smartveri, let out a breath. The same type of "witch's drug" was painted on her skin under her clothes, too, and the slimy sensation felt a little disgusting.

An operator's voice echoed from the small dome in the middle of the fortress's underside—a communicator Soul Arm. *"Numbers three through twenty, thirty through thirty-five, and forty-three through fifty-two, ejection preparations complete! All designated witches, please accelerate sequentially and intercept the incoming knights!!"*

After hearing those words, Smartveri reaffirmed her one-handed grip on her broom, then cast a spell with her other hand and sliced cleanly through the rope she was sitting on.

Immediately, she began a gravity-fueled descent.

Smartveri grabbed a cut rope end with one hand. Her body, now transformed into a giant, twenty-meter pendulum, swayed like a midair trapeze and accelerated. Then, at its lowest point, once she'd brought her energy to its maximum, she let go. The witch straddled her broom and soared, skimming just above the black sea surface.

Modern witches didn't fly through the skies.

Peter, one of the Twelve Apostles, had defeated Simon Magus, said to be a sorcerer who borrowed evil powers to fly, merely by praying to the Lord. Spells based on that legend to bring things out of the air had advanced in the Crossist world, so while it was easy to fly using any unorthodox or "heretical" flight spell that still fell into a category explainable by Crossist teachings, it was also easy to be shot down—an annoying dilemma.

Thus, modern witches didn't fly through the skies. The short and small witches didn't have enough load capacity to equip giant ramparts that could protect against those anti-air spells like the mobile fortress Coven Compass did; instead, they deceived those spells by "traveling along the ground" rather than flying through the sky. By moving at a low altitude and a high speed, they would evade spells in the Peter family. It was common practice.

Thanks to those circumstances, several of the witch's colleagues flew parallel to her as she and her broomstick roared inches over the water's surface. Over a hundred of them were already advancing out over the sea.

They used Soul Arms to communicate at high speeds.

"What's the plan, Smartveri?! We have higher mobility, but in terms of overall combat capabilities, the Knights have us beat! They're already monsters with such strong life force that they can't strengthen their own armor as Soul Arms because the magical mechanisms would destroy them!! But if our information is correct, they're also using the Curtana Original to supply themselves with Telesma! Even if our attacks make direct hits, we don't know if they'll be fatal!!"

"That Curtana Original or whatever operates at maximum power inside Britain, right? …Well, considering they're going to 'invade' Europe, it must have another secret, but it doesn't seem like it'll be used here. Which makes things simple. We've got this big mobile fortress, so if we flee outside the country, that'll cut the Knights' strength in half, you see?"

Smartveri's words were recklessly optimistic as she urged her colleagues onward.

"So I guess we're just going to hold out for the Coven Compass to leave the country's borders? I mean, the whole top surface is an irradiator for a large-scale light-flashing spell. We fight the Knights, however, and lure them outside the borders. Then we might be able to burn the whole lot of those idiots to a crisp."

"So we're the bait, huh? I swear. Looks like it doesn't matter what

age you live in—knights always love chasing after witches' asses."

"That's the theory anyway. It might also be fun to intercept them with seawater manipulation spells, you know?"

"Hey, wait a second. Which one are we going with, then?!"

Just then, the surface of the water in front of the witches shook, as if to block their path.

From out of the black water squirmed several eerily glowing, eyeball-like lights.

"Here they come!!"

Right after Smartveri shouted to her comrades, a whole host of somethings burst out of the water like missiles.

It was the silver armor of the Knights.

Lightning-like, aggressive-looking flashes of light danced on the tips of their spears.

In response, the witches lit fiery glows on the ends of their broomsticks.

One hundred vs. one hundred.

As countless rays of light intersected, the battle between witches and knights began.

Edinburgh, Scotland.

Agnes's unit, which had formerly been conducting investigations into New Light at the yacht harbor, was a middling-sized conglomeration of over 250 people.

And at the moment, they were on the verge of being surrounded by an even larger group of people from the Knight Faction.

"…Their total in all directions is over seven hundred," said Agnes in a low voice, readying her silver Lotus Wand. "Normally, the police all like to rush to unauthorized demonstrations. I thought they were nasty before, but I can't believe they'd start acting this haughty."

Standing with her back to Agnes and gripping a giant wooden wheel in both hands was Lucia. "They don't seem to be using any spells to ward off people. In fact, they don't need to care…Which means the Knights' invasion is proceeding over a large area, as we thought."

"I-I'm worried about London, too. We lost contact with them," said the hunched-over Angeline in a subdued voice, four money

pouches floating around her.

As the nuns stood ready for combat, one person stepped out from among the knights.

He spoke.

"Our orders are to kill as few as possible, but if we clash with such large numbers, I cannot guarantee our ability to uphold those orders. We cannot deny the risk that people may easily be trampled to death even if we have no intent to kill."

"You want us to surrender before anyone gets hurt?" retorted Agnes. "How nice of you."

"…People will die. Is that all right with you?"

As the knight brought his sword back to the ready, Agnes smiled fearlessly.

Smiling, she planted the Lotus Wand into the ground at her feet.

Unconsciously focusing on that was the knights' mistake.

After all, an explosive flash of light burst from it.

Pop!! The sheer white light probably only stole their vision for five seconds, if that.

But when the light faded, the nuns were nowhere to be found.

All two hundred fifty of the sisters had vanished, leaving nobody behind.

"Wh…what…?"

The knight, blinking his eyes inside his helmet, looked around, but he couldn't spot anything that looked like them. Eventually, after the men signaled to one another, they began an area-wide search for the escaped sisters.

"Wow, I'm surprised they didn't figure it out…," Agnes muttered to herself. Around her echoed a *drip-drop* sound.

"…Still, I will admit the environment allowed the color black to protect us."

"D-did we—? Did we really have to jump into the ocean like that…?"

Despite being in a late-October ocean, Lucia was relatively calm, but Angeline's teeth were chattering. They were the only three in the water; the other sisters had all fled to wherever they liked.

Agnes put a hand on a concrete levee and slowly crawled out of the water. The outside air hitting her water-soaked habit made her a lot colder.

"If the Knight Faction is acting so brazenly, we should assume Edinburgh is already in their hands," she said.

"Wh-what should—? What should we do now?" asked the round-shouldered Angeline as Agnes grabbed her hand from the levee and pulled her out of the water.

Lucia was the one to answer, crawling up next to them under her own power. "We can't contact London, either, so we're on our own. Sister Agnes, by your calculations, how usable do you think the people in our unit are?"

"…Well, we all fled in different directions, so the knights will probably catch over half of them."

"Oh no!!" cried Angeline before Agnes put her index finger to the girl's lips.

"Their leader," said Agnes, "the second princess, Carissa, should be in England. It's highly likely the captured nuns will be brought there. Which also means that even though they'll get captured, they'll be safe until they reach England."

"The important thing is that we can simply rescue the sisters again while they're in transit. They did what they could so we could move freely, so we should pay them back to the utmost of our abilities."

Agnes, Lucia, and Angeline quietly nodded to one another in the midnight yacht harbor.

And then, they quietly moved forward.

"…As a start…why don't we do something about these soaking-wet clothes?"

The uprising of Second Princess Carissa and the Knight Faction spread throughout all the United Kingdom.

As a result, for Necessarius, the fight didn't involve the Puritans and the Knights clashing face-first and fighting aggressively until one side went down.

The Puritans had been caught off guard by the surprise attack, so instead of devoting unnecessary energy to trying to scrape their forces back together, they had decided to withdraw for the moment, conserve their strength, and give themselves a higher chance at a

turnabout.

Knowing they'd lose in a pure test of strength, the Puritans had settled on the option of taking only what they really needed from the churches and cathedrals, then swiftly retreating as a whole while fighting local battles.

The Knights and the Puritans were each one of the three factions. Inside England, however, the Knights were higher on the pecking order. In this country, the king or queen was thought of as the angelic leader and the knights who served them as the angels.

If the Puritans, who were merely sorcerers, and the Knights, with angelic powers added to their might, were to clash head-on, it would exhaust them both. They couldn't deny the possibility that in the worst case, everyone in the Puritan faction would be defeated.

In accordance with their true essence, the sorcerers blended in with the darkness, waiting for their chance.

And then.

In Windsor Castle, a magical fortress on the outskirts of London, languished the queen and the archbishop. Elizard was drinking black tea; Laura Stuart's glass was filled with mineral water.

They were the only two here.

The double-doored entrance to the room was locked magically. It was a super-first-class lock worth protecting the royal family.

However…

…Well, it shall be less than thirty seconds until they bust it down from without.

Laura Stuart's thoughts were dangerous, but she had enough reason to think that way.

Outside the window, she could see several torches.

She had started to hear heavy, quick footsteps from inside the castle, too.

All of them were removed from the queen's command. It didn't matter how sturdily her defenses were built—if all the knights who worked for her betrayed her at once, she couldn't do anything about it. The only people in the castle at the moment who swore fealty to her were probably the gardeners and servants who weren't involved with either the Royal Family or the Knights.

Elizard and Laura had noticed the abnormality as the date changed, but their escape route was already gone. They'd barely

managed to lock the door to the room, but even that wouldn't buy them much time.

"…I swear." Laura sighed, shaking the glass with clear liquid in it. "We summoned the Index in advance to try to root up whoever of the three princesses was the troublemaker, planning to analyze their actions. If she hath so many of the Knight Faction hereth now, it must be the militaristic second princess. She moved more quickly than we mused."

"Indeed. Though she is my daughter, so I must say that her swift strategy is fabulous. It seems she really has been blessed with tactical prowess."

"There's your doting habit. We are about to be hanged by our necks—what, exactly, are we to do? Does your boastful Curtana Second still retain its power?"

"About twenty percent of it. The rest was taken away by the Curtana Original." The queen glanced at the bladeless, tipless sword next to her. "If it came to a clash, both I and the Curtana Second would be cleaved in two. It was originally only made to be just enough so it could fill in the gap from losing the original. It hasn't so much been stolen as it's gone back to its rightful place. It was more unusual that any power remained in my sword at all."

She rapped her index finger against the blade's surface.

Somehow, Elizard's tone of voice made it seem like she was having fun. "I have to say, I'm surprised they dug out the original. After we lost it to the revolution, centuries of kings have carried out projects to find it, but none of them even got a hint…Come to think of it, New Light specialized in Scandinavian magic, didn't they? They may have used some kind of vein-searching spell, maybe one from the *dvergr*, for their excavation. In any case, now that the Curtana Original is out in the open, we don't have a chance of winning by smacking swords together."

"Ha-ha-ha. Damn you."

As Laura considered throwing a bucket of water on the queen, the giant doors flung open without a knock. Actually, they were destroyed magically along with the lock. The dozen or so fully armed knights already had their swords unsheathed. This was beyond ill-mannered—it was like a robbery.

One of them spoke. "We, the Knight Faction, have already taken over essential facilities in not only London but all four cultural zones—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In other

words, we have taken most Royal Family and Puritan bases and successfully sealed away their functionality."

"I see," replied Elizard. "And now you're painting the whole United Kingdom in the Knights' colors under Carissa. The only reason this hasn't devolved into a storm of beheadings and bloodshed is that if you carried out executions before using the Curtana Original to establish a new system, you would risk provoking the three factions and four countries of the United Kingdom into all-out resistance, which could cause the entire framework of the nation to collapse."

The knight nodded curtly. He didn't try to kill her without a word—perhaps he still had *some* respect, even for an enemy. "If you don't resist, we will not hurt you unnecessarily. Please make a wise decision so that no needless blood is shed tonight."

"You must have it rough." Queen Elizard had blades pointed at her but still sighed as though appalled at all this. "That's not how Carissa works. The second princess will be displeased if you don't relay her message accurately."

"…"

"If I were my daughter, I'd order you to do this: to give the queen an extremely businesslike request to surrender and, if she doesn't comply, kill her without question. Aside from that…Yes—if you're going to kill her, show no mercy. And you can get the civilian gardeners and servants nearby involved if you must—just swiftly cut the queen down…I'm sure she said all that, at least."

The knight's glove made a soft creaking noise. His hand gripped the sword ever more tightly. The assassin spoke, his voice hushed. "…Give us the Curtana Second and submit to our surveillance…You too—*Puritan*."

"Feh-heh. I lead one of the three factions all the same as our queen, and yet my treatment seemeth quite different."

"We could cut you down right now and it wouldn't matter. Know that we are merciful."

Laura's face remained steady against the knight's intimidation. Her eyes, which watched the queen as she put the Curtana Second into a sheath the knight prepared, seemed somehow relaxed.

She smiled, then turned to her old friend Elizard and said, "So, what should we do?"

2

Index was underneath the Dover Strait, at the explosion site in the Eurotunnel.

At her feet were the tracks.

The giant terminal, the entrance to the Eurotunnel, was in a town somewhat distant from Dover called Folkestone. Many train lines gathered there to be redistributed into the three seafloor tunnels.

Index set foot in one of those three tunnels.

There were some kilometers before the tunnel actually entered the ocean, but Index stopped about twenty meters down the slope from the entrance. The iron- and concrete-enclosed hill ended abruptly. The place where the tunnel had actually broken was distant, but since it was lower than the ground, seawater had gradually risen until it flowed up here.

The two explosions had split the Eurotunnel into three neat portions.

Because of the seawater, which had absorbed the darkness to become black, she couldn't get near the actual explosion point.

But after staring at the seawater blocking off the tunnel in front of her, Index said, "They used a Roman Orthodox spell based on the legend of the House of Loreto as a symbol of destruction."

There was a house in a certain town of Italy said to be the residence of the Virgin Mary. It was famous for disappearing on its own and reappearing on its own; the legends said that in the past, it had instantly moved approximately twice.

"…But it looks like the only effect they added to this tunnel was the plain old 'building-moving' one. When one part of it 'moved' unnaturally, it probably fractured the tunnel."

"Mm-hmm."

"The original House of Loreto is famous for the French king, Louis the Ninth, visiting it. He probably analyzed fragments of it at the time and brought it back to France to use as the theory for a Soul Arm, and now someone used it to blow up the tunnel—I can sense that they altered parts of the spell to make it move into France."

"I see. Then it's nearly certain that the French Roman Orthodox faction was involved in this," said Second Princess Carissa, smiling

slightly.

Smiling as she looked down, her eyes pregnant with meaning.

"…Not only is it a French-made spell—it's one a member of royalty, of all people, was involved in the analysis of. No random sorcerer would be able to use it. We should assume a team directly under their leaders has acted."

"I don't think we can be sure. The French monarchy ended a long time ago, and just because a past king was involved with the spell, that doesn't mean it's necessarily connected to their current government."

"The brains behind the current government ruling that place is an aggregation of strategists and tacticians with the knowledge of kings past. If it were an unorganized think tank, it wouldn't be surprising for them to have treasures from the royal palace in their possession.

"Still," said Carissa, pausing. She looked at Index again. "This really was fortunate."

"?"

"In my case, the only issue was finding out whether France was involved. As long as you didn't tell me France wasn't involved in this case…Well, I'll say it again. This was really fortunate—if you hadn't given me the answer I wanted, *I would have had to cut you down*."

"…?!"

Index saw Carissa's smile up close as it widened and unconsciously braced herself.

But behind her was only the flooded tunnel. There was nowhere for her to run.

And then the head of the Knight Faction, the Knight Leader, arrived.

The man who was supposedly an escort to the two women came with a worn-out, rectangular bag in his hands.

"I will release the Skithblathnir. We should confirm the sword's status before joining the fight in earnest."

When the second princess held out her hand, the Knight Leader undid the lock on the duffel bag.

The mosaic structure on the bag's surface squirmed in a complex way, expanding and transforming into a giant canoe. And inside the boat lay a sheathed sword.

Carissa grabbed the sheath and sneered as she pulled the

bladeless, tipless sword from it. “The Curtana Original…,” she said, swinging it lightly like a baton as Index looked on, not comprehending the situation. “It should be the first thing we break if we hate British tradition, but I’ll use it for our purposes while I can.”

“We’ve established control over the entire United Kingdom. Your words have already come to represent the will of the nation itself, but what declaration shall we make to France?”

“Tell them what the Index just reported and then deliver an ultimatum: It took time and effort for Britain to compile these 103,000 volumes. It only makes sense that we should use them for our national interests.”

Index returned Carissa’s grin with a glare.

The second princess ignored her and said to her knight, “…We can have our forces move with indirect pressure from the Royal Family and Knight Factions, yes? Deploy our cruisers in the Strait of Dover. Make sure they’re ready to fire missiles at Versailles at any time, depending on their answer.”

“We can have our forces move, but what arrangements shall we make regarding the science side—Academy City?”

“Ignore them,” said Carissa simply, rejecting the idea. “Our country should be the one with its hands on the reins of our military might. Having foreign influence on the military would be strange.”

“Understood.”

The decision carried the risk of breaking the precarious tightrope act between Academy City and the English Puritan Church, but Carissa didn’t seem concerned, nor did the Knight Leader make any particular remark.

“Is it wise, however, to make that palace our target?” he asked instead. “The strategists controlling the current French administration from the shadows don’t have a specific base of operations. We have reports that they consciously avoid organizing.”

“But we also know the strategists are sheltering that woman who is their greatest mind. If we get rid of her, the others will realize their city is about to be destroyed along with their nonsensical hideouts.”

“What shall we do about the warheads?”

“Use the bunker clusters the UK independently developed. The

ones that scatter about two hundred special rounds designed to penetrate into shelters up to fifty meters underground. We'll make a bee's nest out of the palace along with an entire city block."

"…This would infringe upon the treaty that categorically bans cluster bombs."

"Heh," Carissa snorted. "The British military never intended to sign that treaty. We were forced to agree out of pressure from the EU's member states, France first and foremost. Still…This is a good opportunity. We can go back over all the treaties we have with foreign powers and get rid of everything we don't need. Starting with these bunker clusters. Everyone in the current EU has the personal support of the Roman Orthodox Church anyway. This is a good chance to cut ties with them."

"…"

"Apart from that, cut our dollar support from the U.S., too. Return the entire dialogue my mother has had with them to a blank slate."

After saying all that, she fell quiet for a moment.

"English Puritan–Academy City vs. Roman Orthodox–Russian Catholic war, my ass…," she spat quietly. "Whether the magic side wins or the science side wins, Britain sinks. If the Roman Orthodox side wins, they'll simply destroy Britain. And even if the Academy City side wins, when the world is painted over in the singular color of science, the magical nation of Britain is sure to be isolated… What meaning is there in a war where we have to depend on others?"

"Is that the reason for your declaration of intent?"

"Yeah. If we want to avoid a future where we're a dependent nation, it'll be too late to act after the war is over. We'll banish the fury of the Roman and Russian Churches, of course, and we also have to cut ties with Academy City. Unless we make this war into a three-way contest where Britain is isolated instead of a conflict between two factions, Britain will have no future. That was the reason for this proclamation. We will use our destroyers to sever our line to Academy City, then use our bunker clusters to prevent interference from Europe, the EU most of all. Isolation is the only method of saving Britain."

"…Isolation from the EU may lead to depletion of our economy and resources. What do you think of the possibility that it could bring about a graver situation than either the Eurotunnel bombing

or the transport route blockade from the hijacking?"

"I'm sure there will be temporary chaos." Carissa didn't deny the possibility and, unfazed, continued, "But by our winning this world-shaking war, the map of the world will change drastically. By driving Roman Orthodox control from the European region and establishing a world with Britain as its center, we can solve the economic and resource problems…What? It's simple, really. It's just like what the U.S. went for by becoming the 'international police' and how Academy City succeeded in secret—if we create a society in which the world needs Britain, we can't possibly dry up."

That was no empty dream. The scale of this "war" slowly corroding the world had already reached such levels. In other words, the world would yield its reins to the victors.

"…I can acknowledge my mother's pacifism, but that doesn't work unless the world is in a peaceful age. She should have realized that the problems in front of her *only looked that way on the surface* and that, in reality, they had blossomed into a planet-wide war," spat Carissa. She hefted the Curtana Original onto her shoulder. "Either way, for the sake of this country's future, we need to win this war without cooperation or interference from anyone else. Putting bunker-cluster-loaded destroyers into the Dover Strait is part of that plan."

"Understood. I will give the order to equip our destroyers in military ports with them."

"Would have been nice to have nukes, too. Maybe we should develop them once things are in order domestically."

"…With all due respect, I would appreciate it if you gave some consideration to the ones who might have to set foot inside the palace after impact, if worse comes to worst."

"Ha-ha. With your body, it would take a lot more than radiation to kill you. You're concerned for the citizens of an enemy nation. We will send a warning before firing…In either case, that woman can't leave Versailles. I don't mind a few concessions."

The Knight Leader gave a pained grin. "Now then," he said, glancing at the confused Index. "What shall we do about the Library of Grimoires?"

"We need her to survive, at least until she makes nearby nations acknowledge the ultimatum we send France as valid."

"What if they officially reverse their stance afterward?"

"Her perfect memory ability should be accurately recording

their own statements, too. If we have her read them out, there should be no room to doubt their trustworthiness."

With the topic now her, Index inched back a little, knowing it was futile. Sure enough, her shoes and habit skirt hem were already starting to soak up seawater.

The Knight Leader spoke curtly. "We will go with that in the long term. What of the short term?"

"Mm," said Carissa with a snort. "Put her to sleep."

Index didn't have time to resist.

The Knight Leader buried his fist in her solar plexus.

3

As though the sniping of Lesser before Touma Kamijou's eyes was the signal, the city of London began to change.

A band of people clad in silver armor proceeded down a thoroughfare.

Intermittent flashes of light and explosions had been continuing intermittently in the night, centered around London's scattered English Puritan establishments. Armored knights were probably skirmishing with priests and sisters at this very moment.

How would the normal folk, who knew nothing of sorcery or supernatural powers, mentally process the sight?

At the very least, they wouldn't be rubbernecking.

Police officers had used patrol cars to set up barricades on the roads, unnaturally blocking the way, and they were repelling any citizens who tried to get close to the scene. If anyone continued to resist, the police would show them no mercy—they'd have them on the ground and arrest them.

"…We can't fool everyone just with an Opila rune," groaned Oriana, hiding behind a corner of the building. "Sorcery incidents happen in Britain a lot. There should be all sorts of large-scale cover-up schemes to hide them—have they all been saturated over capacity…?"

The meaning indicated by the pro sorcerer's words was extremely simple.

The Knight Faction had already nearly completed their coup d'état. Like in other major cities, the British capital of London's functions had also fallen completely into the hands of the "enemy."

"Shit. Is the chaos keeping ambulances from getting here?" said

Kamijou bitterly, holding the unconscious Lesser. “Looks like the only thing to do is to meet up with Necessarius. I’m sure they’ve got sorcerers who can use healing magic.”

“Yes. However…” Oriana’s words faltered for a moment.

Index, who had been with Kamijou before now, was currently on an investigation at the Eurotunnel bombing site in Folkestone with Second Princess Carissa and the Knight Leader, the latter two believed to be the ones who orchestrated the coup.

Something had to have happened.

Index was a point of concern as well.

“…We have to get her medical attention quickly.” Kamijou looked at Lesser in his arms, then listened to the rattle of a distant explosion. “Since it looks like we’ve got more than one problem.”

“Yes…”

Kamijou and Oriana nodded to each other, then left their hiding spot behind the building.

They headed for the English Puritan women’s dormitory, located in Lambeth.

According to Oriana, after the commotion, most of the Puritan Faction’s sorcerers were beginning a retreat, crossing blades here and there to buy time, taking only the really important documents and Soul Arms from the churches and other religious establishments. If they went to a Puritan church, the likelihood of sorcerers being there was low.

And the issue was that Oriana was currently both powerful and a criminal, and they were just using her temporarily as part of a deal.

In other words, they didn’t trust her enough to tell her what their emergency escape route was.

“…But the rear guard should still be at that dorm to buy time to hide important materials and Soul Arms. If we’re going to get in touch, we’ll have to ask them for help.”

Unfortunately, something was blocking their way—a giant river.

There was a large river over two hundred meters wide that snaked from north to south in London. They’d have to cross the nearby bridge to get to the safe zone, but…

“Crap, that silver armor…Are they with the Knights?!”

A truck was parked near the base of the bridge. About eight people wearing heavy armor were in the trunk. Was the truck in the

middle of letting them off, or were they trying to inspect it? In any case, unless Kamijou and Oriana did something about them, they couldn't cross the bridge.

Then, as she observed the knights, Oriana wordlessly removed her flashcards. "As far as I can tell, we don't have the time to stay here for long."

For just a moment, she glanced at the unconscious Lesser, then turned her gaze back onto the knights.

"I'll get rid of them."

"…You can do that?"

"I would have preferred a 'will you do that,'" answered Oriana with a smile, but he could see a little bit of tension in her face.

Oriana Thomson was a courier—an expert at fleeing. She was great at befuddling opponents to get them to drop out of the chase, but she couldn't have been used to head-on clashes with eight knights in full equipment like that.

But Oriana still said she'd get rid of them.

In order to let Kamijou, carrying the wounded Lesser, get across the bridge as soon as possible.

"Once you get her to the women's dorm, head for Waterloo Station. It's in Lambeth, too."

"What?"

"The line named Eurostar connects directly to France. It passes through the Eurotunnel, which goes through the Strait of Dover. You can't use the tunnel right now because of the bombing, but it should still be connected to Folkestone, the tunnel's entrance."

"You're not…"

"It's a straight shot of one hundred kilometers from London to Folkestone. If you want to save the Index, you won't be able to run there…The same goes for the Knights. If they have control of all of Britain, they'll need to exchange personnel and goods next. You'll need to cleverly blend in on the Knight-operated Eurostar train."

Kamijou nodded, then looked back to the bridge.

Even if he could bust through there, that didn't mean everything would be peachy. There were probably Knight Faction assassins near the women's dorm, too, and besides, after solving the Lesser problem, he'd have to rescue Index—and that would involve getting right up to the second princess, the mastermind behind the coup d'état who had taken control of the entire United Kingdom. It seemed like no matter how many lives he had, it wouldn't be

enough.

But…

I don't have any other choice, he thought, looking at the unconscious Lesser in his arms. *It's a hopeless situation—and that's why I can't afford to stop!!*

That was when it happened.

Kamijou's ears and body simultaneously sensed a low *thump*. Oriana seemed to feel it, too. She looked around, expression dubious.

And then another tremor came.

This one was clearer than before. Kamijou looked over in that direction—

And in spite of himself, he groaned.

"This can't be…"

4

"The problems now are my mother and sisters," Carissa stated as she left the Eurotunnel exit onto the surface. "We'll have to kill them. Only members of the royal bloodline can use the Curtana, so we would probably be better off limiting the right to use it."

There were no lights this night—it was dark everywhere.

"Reports say we've confined my mother to Windsor Castle, but I wonder where my older sister Limeia could be. Her distrust of people is a gifted survival instinct. She probably didn't come to the Eurotunnel because she could smell the blood, and I don't think she's about to reveal her own hideout to others."

"…In addition," the Knight Leader began, "she has hidden her identity and gone into town in the past. She may have secured a certain number of potential people who would shelter her without realizing she's the first princess."

"Still, it's ten to one she's in London or its outskirts." The second princess looked around. Her eyebrow arched in displeasure. "The great and competent first princess aside, where did the incompetent third princess go?"

"Regarding that…" The Knight Leader pointed at the cluster of carriages, a group consisting of the one for the royal family and the others that escorted or served it, lined up in rows.

And one of them had disappeared.

Considering the situation, it was appropriate to assume the

third princess, Vilian, was in it. But despite coming to an answer, Carissa's expression remained dubious.

"…How did my little sister sense the danger? I thought she was much better at trusting people than doubting them."

"____" The Knight Leader hesitated for a moment before answering.

But before he could open his mouth, Carissa said, "I get it; I get it. My older sister is the brains; I'm the military; and she's the virtuousness. She may be incompetent, but she merely has to gather talented people around her to solve the problem."

As she spoke, she walked over to a different spot from where the carriages were parked. Already, several servants thought to have perpetrated Vilian's escape were surrounded by fully armed knights.

"Doesn't look like there are any Guards Maids or otherwise armed aides to intercept us. If that saint Sylvia were here, we might have had some trouble, too."

"…Lady Vilian has always had a special dislike for possessing military force. Most of the people here are civilian servants of common descent."

"Hmph. Is that why her mood was suddenly so foul? Whatever their social or work positions may be, it's no reason for us to forgive them for sensing the danger and letting her escape."

"However—"

"I mean, you already 'asked' them where Vilian went, didn't you? And they didn't tell you anything. If they had, the report that her destination was unknown wouldn't have bubbled up."

As the servants looked on, huddling together, Carissa drew her sword from her sheath.

It was a special sword, without blade or tip.

"It's called the sword of mercy because of its shape, but…Is that the truth, I wonder? It seems to me that its inability to kill instantly is cruel."

Someone gasped as they saw the sword swing up.

A gulp rang out in the heavy darkness.

The second princess never wanted to question them.

All she planned to do was kill them.

And then…

The Knight Leader stood in her way, in front of the frightened

servants.

Without a word, Carissa looked at the man who stood before her and paused a moment.

Almost without moving her lips, she said, “What is this?”

“I would advise that you withdraw your sword.”

“I don’t need to listen to you.”

“Then you may cut me in two as well.”

The words came without hesitation. Carissa’s shoulders moved.

“Oh ho,” she laughed.

Nevertheless, several of the servants who saw her grin from behind the Knight Leader yelped in spite of themselves. The way she grinned had taught them that smiles were how people conferred terror unto others.

“…You’re far from faithful,” said the second princess, sounding truly amused as she peered into the Knight Leader’s darkness. “I’m sure you calculated things this way. That you’re still necessary for me to have around. That even if you were to suppress my freedoms as second princess—no, as the head of state—that you’re still a trump card I need to protect. That’s why you could stand up for those servants…You’ve got some good negotiation skills. And you’re right—at the moment, I can’t take your life just to take the lives of some commoners.”

“…”

“But remember this.”

The second princess widened her smile as far as it would go.

With a face like a torn bag, her sword glowing in the moonlight, she gave her warning.

“Things are different when it comes to my mother and sisters. If you interrupt their executions like this, I will cut you in two without a second thought. Their deaths are more important than your life.”

“…Understood,” said the Knight Leader, not letting emotion into his tone of voice. “I simply advise that you refrain from passing unnecessary judgment…I have no reason to stop you from doing what you really need to do.”

“I sure hope not.”

The second princess sheathed the Curtana Original, shrugged, and left. At a glance from the Knight Leader, the knights surrounding the servants also broke apart, slowly leaving spaces in

their ranks.

Without looking at the faces of the servants, now standing alone, the Knight Leader said, “Go.”

“…Sir Knight Leader, sir. We care not for ourselves. But please, we beg of you. See to it that Lady Vilian is—”

“Now!!” he roared.

The servants quieted, unsure of what to do. Nevertheless, after bowing their heads once, they withdrew into the dark forest.

None of the knights spoke to the Knight Leader, who alone remained.

Without watching to see where the servants ultimately went, he growled.

“…If you want to kill me to stop me, then bring *him* here.”

5

Touma Kamijou and Oriana saw something in front of the giant stone bridge.

It was a giant, over four meters tall and made of stone. Or, more accurately, it was a hodgepodge collection of concrete and asphalt.

Kamijou knew what it was.

He knew the golem, which used anything and everything as its materials, and he knew the sorcerer in gothic Lolita dress who controlled it.

“Ellis the golem…?! Is Sherry doing something?!”

As if in response, a roar bellowed.

It didn’t belong to Ellis. Ellis didn’t have vocal cords.

The roar had come directly from the mouth of the lionlike sorcerer controlling it.

“Goooaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

As Sherry roared, drowning herself in anger, Ellis made a big move.

Its large body rushed at the knights, hastily moving at the base of the bridge. In one strike, it caused the truck with their silver armor on board to explode, sending both orange flames and knights flying in all directions. Of course, they were seasoned veterans, and that wasn’t enough to beat them, but…

“…”

Ellis swung its foot up toward one of the knights lying on the asphalt.

Ignoring the mace he used to try to defend himself, the golem dropped its foot with all the force of a hammer slamming a nail.

Ga-thud!! Despite how far away they were, the impact threatened to take even Kamijou's and Oriana's feet out from underneath them.

Another of Sherry's angry shouts rang out.

Oh right, she's…!! Touma Kamijou remembered Sherry Cromwell's magic name—and her reason for it.

About twenty years ago, she'd lost a close friend by the name of Ellis. The reason for it was exceedingly political, but the group who had done the job was directly affiliated with the Knight Faction.

After a long time and with at least some of her wounds healed, the Knights had appeared before her once again. Strangely enough, just like before, the British Knights were wielding violence for political reasons.

She had barely managed to forgive it the first time. But could she forgive it a second time?

The answer to that question was Sherry herself.

"Shit, she's completely off the rails! It looks like she's driving them back by having Ellis charge, but if they go after Sherry, things will turn around in an instant!!"

"…This isn't good," agreed Oriana.

Kamijou's gaze fell to Lesser in his arms. "What now? Help her?! At this rate, Sherry will—"

"You've got it backward, stupid!!" interrupted Oriana with a shout, preventing him from continuing. "That sorcerer isn't thinking about anything except killing as many enemies as she can! Even if they kill her!! If we leave her be, it won't stop at the Knights—the entire street could be destroyed!!"

Kamijou's body tensed.

Oriana's face showed nervousness that was stronger than before. "You use the chaos to get over the bridge and go to the women's dorm…And I'll use the commotion to interrupt the Knights. I'll knock out all the ones preoccupied with the golem and look for a chance to get that sorcerer to snap out of it!!"

"Can you even do that?! You'd be by yourself!!"

"Would you abandon the girl you saved to come with me?"

Oriana glanced at the "package" in Kamijou's arms.

Then she looked him straight in the eye. “It’s simple division of labor. Things will go smoother if you, someone they trust a little, go to ask for healing magic instead of a sinner like me bringing an ‘enemy’ sorcerer to the women’s dorm. Besides, your right hand doesn’t seem too good for group battles, does it?”

“Damn,” he swore. He wanted to stop Oriana from going, but she was right—he couldn’t abandon Lesser for it. “Can I leave it to you, Oriana?”

“You can trust me.”

Kamijou and Oriana nodded to each other, then jumped out from their hiding spot.

Ellis the golem’s intrusion had chased the knights a short distance away from the stone bridge. Carrying Lesser, Kamijou ran past them and headed for the bridge. A few people noticed him, but Ellis and Oriana were on the knights before they could do anything about it.

Clenching his teeth at the explosions behind him and their vibrations, Kamijou ran at full speed.

The bridge was over two hundred meters long.

Lesser felt very heavy in his hands, but he managed to get over the bridge somehow.

But then something strange happened.

On the opposite riverbank, Ellis swung its giant arm. Several silver suits of armor were struck by the force and blasted away. At the same time, their swords and spears broke and shattered in the air.

A professional sorcerer may have realized something then.

One of the broken spears had been a Soul Arm called Brionac.

The two pieces of the spear whirled through the air. And from its tip surged a flash of lightning.

There was no sound.

Only blinding lights popped out. Five rays of light shot out like a beam cannon. The cluster of white flashes crossed the river in an instant, some of them directly, others refracting, plunging into the district of Lambeth.

A low rumble jarred both Kamijou’s feet and his mind.

The city…!!

Without meaning to, he stopped and tried to look into the distance. He couldn’t make out the details from here, but at the very least, it seemed like no buildings collapsed or huge dust clouds

went up.

He breathed a little sigh of relief, but he froze mid-breath.

He'd noticed it.

Far off in the distance, the land bridge for the train had crumbled. The bridge's structure had broken, and now it was leaning against the ground. The torn-up rails gave off crackling sparks.

"Crap…"

The Eurostar.

The train rail connecting to Folkestone one hundred kilometers away, where Index was waiting.

"What am I supposed do now, damn it?!"

6

The operation to pursue the third princess, Vilian, began immediately.

The carriages were originally for use by the royal family and their escorts, but in order to prevent several kinds of trouble, they came standard-equipped with systems that detected locational information. The Knight Leader crouched on the asphalt road, held out his palm, and muttered something. When he did, several lines ran through the road like someone had spread luminous paint on it.

They were the trails of the carriage wheels.

"Distance is approximately two thousand meters. Speed is fifty kilometers per hour. Given their direction, they seem to be heading for Canterbury through Dover in order to detour around the mountains."

"I see. The Puritans' main public headquarters is there, isn't it? She decided to go running into their base now that she knows she can't rely on the Royal Family or the Knights." Carissa smiled a little. "Such absurdly shallow thinking."

"Shall we pursue?"

"First, I want to verify something. Wouldn't the servants who supplied the carriage know a thing or two about these detection systems? Is it possible the carriage is being used as a dummy?"

"They've seen magic before but never used it. The reports said they were of common birth."

"Then if this is a dummy, I'll have your head," said the second princess lightly.

Thrusting the knights aside using only her glare, she headed for where all the carriages were parked. But not to her own extravagant carriage meant for the royal family's use; she went to a war horse trained to carry veteran knights.

"Let's go. We don't have time to play with my incompetent sister anyway. Let's kill her and solidify our new system's foundation. I don't think France will move swiftly, but it would still be bothersome if they took advantage of this."

But the Knight Leader didn't respond. Like a fox who'd heard a small sound, he looked up sharply.

"What is it?"

"An aircraft," the Knight Leader answered shortly.

She looked around but didn't see any planes. Without a word, the Knight Leader pointed to his ear. He really did seem to recognize it by sound.

"But it's strange," he said. "We've seized nearly all the means of transportation. We've closed off all airports in England, both civilian and military, so nobody should be able to use the runways right now."

The second princess extended her right hand from the horse; the Knight Leader tossed her the binoculars. Carissa caught them with one hand, then looked around again before stopping on a single point.

"There it is. A low-flying aircraft. Just above the ground…Are they trying to get under our radar?"

Through her narrow field of vision in the binoculars, she spied a giant aircraft flying at an altitude of five meters above the asphalt. It looked like a transport plane; its main wings had four propellers on them.

Carissa took the binoculars from her eyes and smiled. "If it's not reinforcements, then it's been hijacked."

"But all the runways should be sealed off!" shouted the Knight Leader. "Even if someone broke through, there should have been some sort of report!!"

"Confirm the status of our communication Soul Arms. They might actually be cutting off only important transmissions and jamming us," muttered Carissa, throwing the binoculars back to him. "As for the runways, well—just look at that. Floats attached to the bottom of the plane. It's a hydroplane. It can use rivers or oceans as a substitute for runways for takeoff and landing…Come to

think of it, there was a water rescue craft anchored in the lake at Hyde Park in London for an aircraft enthusiast event, wasn't there?"

"I'll bring it down," said the Knight Leader shortly.

From the top of her war steed, Carissa responded in a bored tone. "It's too late. It's already here."

Vwooh!! A gust of wind rattled through the dark forest.

The rescue craft wasn't so much flying through the sky as it was hovering and using its propellers to move. Like a bullet, it shot right across the ground at a breakneck pace, passing straight by the group of knights.

However, the slide-out door on its side was open.

And a figure jumped down from it, landing without mercy in the middle of the knights.

With a speed of over five hundred kilometers per hour, the rescue craft's output, it wasn't a fall from above so much as a projectile landing from the side.

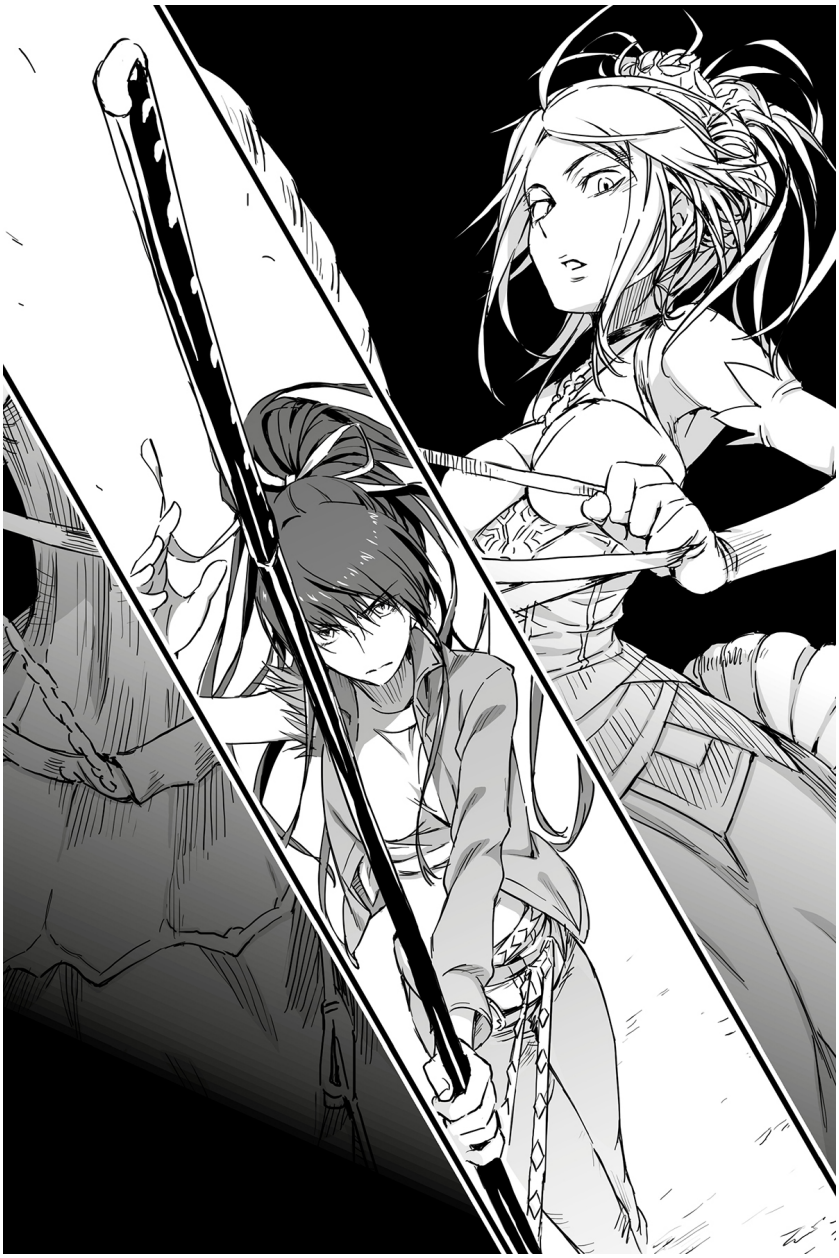
Any normal human would have been splattered all over the road. Actually, they might have made a crater meters wide, too.

But this person landed softly in the middle of enemy lines.

Floating.

Almost like a feather.

It wasn't an easily understood close-combat performance like a martial arts demonstration. But anyone who had above-average skill in martial arts would have naturally known the incredible level of skill shown by each one of the little motions making up the phenomenon before their eyes. That was the kind of movement it was.



The knights around the person hastily drew their swords on the unexpected assailant, but the figure in their center ignored them and glared at Carissa.

"The saint?" said Carissa quietly, meeting her gaze. "Which means Amakusa remnants were flying the plane."

"…The time for words will be later."

Surrounded by many a knight, Kaori Kanzaki reached for her katana sheath.

"I don't think this will easily quell all the chaos, but I'll start by defeating the mastermind."

Carissa's response was disinterested. "I don't have time for this."

At those words, the Knight Leader took a step forward, as if to protect his horsebound princess. "Allow me to take care of her."

Carissa snorted, then regripped the war steed's reins. Slowly, she turned it around, then ran off in pursuit of the third princess. Kanzaki watched her go, her eyes growing more severe.

But the Knight Leader took a step to the side to block her.

With her hand on her katana sheath, Kanzaki exhaled slowly and with almost unnatural calmness. "Were you so stubborn in your invitations because you knew how things would turn out?"

"I was not lying when I said I wanted you to spend some time as a noblewoman."

Darkly colored emotions swirled in the Knight Leader's eyes.

"But it seems like I was too late for that. Now that you've stood before me as an enemy, I will beat you down without mercy."

7

Kaori Kanzaki was a saint.

Saints possessed talents or physical characteristics shared by less than twenty people in the world. Because they had similar magical signals to the Son of God when they were born, they received a part of that power and could use it freely.

For most enemies, she would never have to even draw her katana.

She also had a mid- to long-range combat technique called Seven Glints, which was based on wires, and just swinging the

Seven Heavens Sword's long sheath was enough to blow most sorcerers away.

…My opponent is the head of the Knight Faction, the Knight Leader. I won't be able to defeat him that easily.

Attentive to the Knight Leader's demeanor, Kanzaki tightened her fingers around the grip.

It looks like I have no choice but to go all out, but if I can end this without killing him…I'll knock him out with the sheath, then swiftly apprehend the second princess!! That's the only way to quickly settle this nonsensical rebellion!!

However…

Shudder.

Suddenly, something she couldn't see was released from the Knight Leader's body.

The man disappeared from Kaori Kanzaki's sight.

She needed a moment to realize he'd moved outside her vision with incredible speed.

By that time, the whooshing of wind was already roaring right behind her.

"?!"

She immediately turned around and brought her katana sheath up to defend.

The Knight Leader's attack was a simple kick.

Nevertheless, it rocked Kanzaki's body along with the sheath that blocked it. As she bent over backward and lost her balance, the man simply threw a punch.

Whabaaaam!! An enormous roar thundered.

Kanzaki's body flew ten meters through the air and rammed into one of the escort carriages. Supposedly protected by several Soul Arms, the carriage shattered into pieces, and Kanzaki's body slid farther, down to the ground. The horse attached to the carriage began to go crazy.

"Gah…wh…what…?!"

I knew he'd be hard to deal with…but what is this power…?!

Physically, humans—saints included—were supposed to have an upper limit on the amount of power they could use. This man was clearly above that.

Could he be like Acqua…? The high-speed stabilizing line…?!

As she struggled for breath, questions arose in her mind, but

she had no time to calmly consider them.

The Knight Leader had already jumped five meters high, his soles ready to crush her.

"?!"

Kanzaki immediately rolled aside.

But even with the physical abilities of a saint, she couldn't flee to a safety zone.

She avoided a direct hit, but the asphalt fragments that exploded around her pelted her body. Blood spurted from her as she lay on the ground, and the Knight Leader looked down at her quietly from his landing point. He wasn't cautiously observing her —his expression said he had no need for haste in a follow-up.

"Why the surprised face?"

As her entire body warned her of the danger and her mind focused on her very fingertips and the tips of her hair, the Knight Leader gently spread his arms. It wasn't composure he showed. It was closer to disappointment.

"I am the leader of the Knights, one of the three factions. You may be a saint, but you're nothing more than one member of the Puritans. Did you think you could fight me on equal terms?"

"!!" Without answering, Kanzaki unleashed her seven wires.

Seven Glints.

"…Long ago, I suffered a terrible surprise attack from an old friend in Dover."

But the Knight Leader wasn't moved. He brought a hand up into the air, grabbed all the wires she'd physically released, and ripped them apart. He didn't use any tools to do it—he didn't even use both hands.

"Even since then, one way or another, I've begun to be cautious of such surprise attacks."

After speaking, the Knight Leader "threw" the torn wires. They were sharp, but common sense said they were just strings. They shouldn't have had any power—but when they directly struck Kanzaki's body, she rocketed backward like a cannonball.

"Guh…boh…!!"

This time, Kanzaki only stopped after crashing into one of the forest's trees.

Torn wires weren't wires anymore. He had used his incredible gripping power to crush them, squeezing the metal strings into a single mass, then fired them like a bullet from a handgun.

“The one who is to stand before me should, at the very least, be an equal—the leader of the Puritan Faction.”

The Knight Leader cracked his knuckles and spoke quietly.

“No—in terms of abilities, the Puritan Faction wouldn’t be enough. The Royal Family Faction is worthy of respect, but I am their better when it comes to brute force. I’ll be honest with you. You’re not good enough to play the part.”

An earsplitting *thud!!* rang out.

By the time the Knight Leader’s body had vanished, he was already directly in front of Kanzaki. She jumped to the side, and a moment later, the Knight Leader’s foot knocked away a large tree trunk in one strike. It didn’t break it—it sent it flying. Kanzaki’s hand, trembling at the power, moved unconsciously—and reached for her katana sheath.

Oh no…?!

The cause of the chill down Kanzaki’s spine wasn’t a threat to her own life.

Her hand had moved immediately.

By the time she realized it, her right hand had already whipped the katana from its sheath. The true teaching, Single Glint. A single strike, certain to kill even angels of monotheism, raged toward the Knight Leader’s neck with perfect aim.

He was unarmed. He had no actual weapons, and his suit didn’t have any Soul Arm effects.

But…

With an earsplitting *grrrkkkk*…

…the Knight Leader grabbed hold of Kanzaki’s katana with one hand.

This time, it was confusion that enveloped her entire being, not fear.

With the blade stopped, the Knight Leader began speaking. “Do you know why, when we gained control over Britain, the old-timers in Necessarius chose not to offer any large-scale, organized resistance but instead decided to swiftly blend in with the night and watch for a chance?”

Still gripping the katana’s blade, he brought one foot off the ground.

“It’s because they knew. They knew that as long as they were in

Britain, if they fought us on equal terms, *they would never be able to defeat the Knights*."

Kaboom!! A huge explosion ripped through the air.

It was the sound of the Knight Leader kicking Kanzaki. The immense power forced Kanzaki to let go of the Seven Heavens Sword and knocked her far, far away.

"Constructed by the Curtana and four different cultures, our nation—no, the British Continent—is itself bound by specific Crossist rules. In its domain, the sovereign is the angelic leader, and the knights are angels…As long as we are in this country, the simple sum of our strength is different. If you wished to kill me, you should have dragged me outside British borders."

"…Urgh…"

Kanzaki, mind hazy, saw the Knight Leader toss her Seven Heavens Sword to the side.

"And for the Knights, the English Puritan Church, which Henry the Eighth separated from political matters, is not something to trust—it is merely something to use. Our essence is to combine every path to knighthood, be it Scandinavian, Celtic, Charlemagnian, or Germanic, and make them into one ideal…Your attack just now seemed like one that detours around several spells to wound angels, but such a route cannot even be called a detour."

Kanzaki tried to stand.

But her legs had no energy.

Despite the unique environment and situation, he was more unfair than any enemy she'd fought before. The archangel known as the Power of God, which manifested in an incomplete state—Acqua of the Back, who used that angel as his symbol. She'd fought such strong enemies before, but she had at least been able to exchange blows with them.

But the Knight Leader wouldn't even allow her that.

And he didn't even take pride in that strength.

"Still willing?"

The Knight Leader's eyes narrowed.

His expression seemed unamused.

"Either way, a mere saint cannot kill me when I am at my best."

As Kanzaki tried to rally her strength, the Knight Leader casually walked up to her.

While he did, he said:

“And I haven’t even drawn my ‘sword’ yet.”

Thud!! He kicked away Kanzaki’s body.

It wasn’t any kind of martial arts move—it was like kicking a soccer ball.

Kanzaki’s body floated up into the air, then tumbled back down to the ground.

Without bothering to look her way, the Knight Leader began giving signaled instructions to his nearby subordinates. They each mounted their carriages and war horses, then pointed them in the direction that the second princess went.

From atop his own horse, the Knight Leader spared just one glance at Kanzaki.

Seeing her completely unconscious, he muttered to himself.

“Is this all there is to a saint?”

8

The third princess, Vilian, was in a carriage.

It wasn’t the royal family’s carriage she’d been riding in before now. But there was no doubt the carriage was extravagant, and it was covered with multitudes of practical little functions. It was meant for escort.

There was no driver.

This carriage had integrated magical devices. All you had to do was set your destination, and it would automatically send commands to the two horses, which meant you could make them run by themselves.

In any case, she’d been in a hurry and feeling more impatient than she’d needed to be, so Vilian hadn’t even had the time to light a lantern. Only the faint lights from the autopilot Soul Arms illuminated the dark carriage interior.

*To the Canterbury Cathedral…*Vilian thought about the majestic cathedral about ten kilometers away from her location. *For now, I have to escape there. If there are still Puritans left, I need to at least have them rescue the servants who let me escape…!!*

But such wishes couldn’t be granted.

Suddenly, the two horses pulling the carriage began to act up. They each tried to go in the wrong direction, violently twisting the carriage on its path and toppling it over. With a loud *craaaaash*, the

third princess nearly lost consciousness.

"Ugh…"

At the weak neighing of one of the horses, Vilian managed to open her eyes.

Inside the sideways carriage, the autopilot Soul Arms had scattered. Unlike before, red warning lights were dancing.

Then she heard a voice from the communicator Soul Arm fixed to the inside of the carriage.

"Oh, give up already. Come out like a good girl or hide in there. I don't care—you'll die either way. If you still have regrets, then get rid of them yourself. If you want to pray, be my guest."

"…!!"

Vilian's spine froze at the familiar voice of her sister.

The only sounds she could hear from the communicator Soul Arm were Carissa's cruel words.

"Three."

It was a countdown.

But she wasn't trying to get anything out of Vilian.

"Two."

She'd kill her either way.

In other words, it was just to scare her little sister and make her suffer.

"One."

Vilian was pressed for a decision.

Logically, the carriage may have been on its side, but it was still protected by some of its Soul Arms, so staying in it would be safer. After all, unlike her older sister, Vilian couldn't use any offensive magic.

"Zero."

But Vilian immediately reached for the door.

From inside the flipped carriage, she threw open the door above her like a submarine hatch and used all the strength she had to lean out of it.

Just then, some kind of magnificent power grew from outside the carriage.

The destructive force mercilessly tore the carriage apart along with its defensive Soul Arms. The third princess, who had barely gotten her body up out of it, fell to the ground. She didn't even

have time to make sure she was safe and sound.

"It's no use relying on the Canterbury Cathedral. You know that, right?"

Carissa's voice.

When she looked, she saw a war steed right next to her. Carissa looked down at Vilian, sunken into the ground, from atop it.

In her hand was a sword.

Upon seeing the bladeless, tipless sword, Vilian's expression took on the color of doubt.

…That isn't…the Curtana Second…?

"That escort carriage didn't lose its autopilot control because of anything we did. Your destination in Canterbury jammed you to make you lose their position…You understand why, right? You've been abandoned."

"…?! That's…That can't…!!"

"The Royal Family and the Knights are in my hands. The Puritans don't seem to have any plans to protect you, either. It looks like this wraps things up. You no longer have any allies. Not one."

Several light sources drew near the second princess from behind. Carriages and war horses with lanterns on them. A dozen or so knights who had been protecting Vilian before. All of them were no more than "power" the second princess controlled.

Crumpled on the ground, unable to move out of terror, the third princess was immediately surrounded.

One of them, the Knight Leader, gave a report. "The saint has been dealt with. No obstacles are present."

"I see. Then can I get you to do something else for me?"

At Carissa's words, the third princess's shoulders gave a jolt of surprise.

The Knight Leader returned Carissa's gaze, his expression seeming to question her true intent.

The second princess said, "I told you before. I won't listen to any selfish requests when it comes to the third princess."

"…Understood," answered the Knight Leader, dismounting.

Vilian couldn't believe it.

He may have been assigned directly to the second princess. His decision was appropriate—if he was simply accepting an order. But the Knight Leader wasn't someone Vilian had just met yesterday. She'd known him for over ten years, more or less.

She couldn't count all the times she'd trusted him with something.

He'd always protected her from the shadows at evening parties. The fact that all those political marriages had ended in the planning phase and never come about was probably because he'd been doing his best for her from a place history would never see.

She couldn't think he'd kill her that easily. Because the third princess was neither the brains nor the military might but the paragon of virtuosity, she found herself strongly believing that fact.

It could be that the Knight Leader was only putting on an act.

Maybe his plan was to make it look like he killed her to deceive the second princess and let her escape.

The fact that she thought this way was less optimism and more escapism.

That was when an undeniable hopelessness instantaneously shattered any ideas she had.

"…If I behead her with a sword, it will crush the cut section. Bring the ax used for executing royalty. Preferably the heaviest, cleanest-cutting one. A princess remains a princess in death. We cannot show anything sloppy when we display her head to the masses, or it would shame her in front of the people."

When the Knight Leader made that request of a subordinate, Vilian felt her throat dry up.

"…Hee……ah…"

She couldn't form words anymore.

The inside of her mouth was stuck, so no real sounds came out.

A fully armed knight brought an ax. It was about one meter long and had a blade on only one side. It didn't seem like mere iron —she could sense something graver in it: that it was no simple decoration, that it had really drawn the blood of many people before.

The Knight Leader took the ax without a word, then for some reason, he looked around.

To either side of the dark path was forest. There was nothing bright anywhere. After making sure they were the only ones present, the Knight Leader quietly closed his eyes and exhaled.

His face looked like he was expecting something.

His face looked like he had lost hope in something.

"I'm starting," said the Knight Leader, opening his eyes.

Thud…!! A dull sound rang out. The Knight Leader had hefted

the ax onto his shoulder once, then swung it even farther up in a wide arc.

"W-wahh…Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

Vilian could only scream, wordlessly, unable to get up.

Even then, the Knight Leader's expression did not waver.

The execution ax he'd raised had its sights set on Vilian's neck. With his skills, he wouldn't have to go through the trouble of holding her down. He could behead her just fine regardless.

Only Carissa sounded annoyed. "You can scream for help if you want. I'm sure someone would hear you. But don't think any of them would listen."

Those words pierced Vilian's heart the deepest.

There were so many people in this world. There were plenty of people with amazing strength—but none of them would stand up for her. Surrounded by knights wielding weapons of all kinds, the third princess was in solitude. An overwhelming loneliness seemed to tell her that this was the end for fallen royalty.

Tears began to well up and fall.

They came from fear, or sorrow, or perhaps humiliation.

The Knight Leader's eyebrow twitched for a moment as if to indicate his feelings.

But he was still the second princess's tool.

"…This is good-bye. I will promise you one last thing. I will personally take care of your head once I sever it. I will correct the muscles, the skin, and make you the same—no, even more beautiful than you were in life, so that all who gaze upon it will remember you."

His last words to her had been spoken.

The Knight Leader, without a hint of hesitation, brought the execution ax down on her with both hands.

Down on the third princess's neck.

As if to tell her he would not make her suffer needlessly by hesitating.

At the same time…

Gapaaaaaa!! An enormous impact assailed the knights surrounding them.

It mowed down their lines and shattered the execution ax held by the Knight Leader.

That very moment.

Several of the knights who had been blown away muttered to themselves, shocked:

"…He's returned?"

That very moment.

The second princess, from atop her horse, Curtana Original in hand, said, without letting her relaxed attitude dissipate:

"You're back?"

That very moment.

Throwing away the broken ax hilt and glaring straight in front of him, the Knight Leader bellowed at the opponent who had appeared there, with a smile on his face:

"You've returned!"

Then, several mouths moved at once.

Someone—or perhaps everyone—said his name.

""""William Orwell!!""""

The third princess, Vilian, couldn't grasp what had happened to her.

She had just been slumped on the ground, and now she was floating. No, she was in a certain man's arms. He held her, powerfully, with a single arm and gripped a giant sword in the other. An absurdly large sword, quite easily boasting a length of over three meters.

The letters engraved on the great sword's surface spelled *Ascalon*.

And there was something attached to the base.

It was a crest.

The emblem that was supposed to have decorated the hallway in Buckingham Palace, and the only emblem that was never supposed to see the light of day. A certain mercenary's emblem, with green laid atop blue, depicting a dragon, unicorn, and silkie in a three-sided struggle.

Vilian knew him.

She knew the man's name.

"Are you safe, princess of the kingdom?"

They were short words with only the minimum of courtesy. The words of a mercenary who disliked speaking too much. When she heard the curt question, the third princess finally realized what had happened.

The owner of this warm arm had stood up for Vilian's sake.

Casting away the Royal Family, the Knights, and the Puritans alike.

The mercenary alone had dashed to her aid.

"…You're…late…"

Faced with reality, Vilian's eyes overflowed with tears.

They were clearly different from the ones she'd shed before.

The reason for her tears had changed.

Changed enough that she was surprised there existed tears she so wanted to shed.

Without resisting the feelings welling up inside her, tears falling in large drops, she shouted, at the top of her lungs:

"You're late, you failure of a mercenary!!"

And so the princess was brought to the evil dragon's lair along with the sheep.

The princess knew her fate was dire.

But then a wandering knight came to her on a horse.

A knight among knights, bearing a lance and a holy sword.

They say his name was St. George.

EPILOGUE

Respective Purposes and Burdens

War_in_Britain.

A lone carriage ran down a path without any streetlights in a dark forest. With its old lantern, it felt like a scene out of a picture book. In fact, its current passengers were the queen of England and the archbishop, so maybe it was perfect material for a picture book.

However.

Women sitting in a two-seater, four-person carriage chained to their seats by fifty restraints maybe wasn't the kind of story you'd tell a child before bed. And when you added the truth, that they were being brought to London as captives after a coup d'état had captured the city…you might start having nightmares.

Elizard and Laura had been made to sit next to each other.

One of their escort knights was sitting in the opposite seat.

"…'Twould seem the majority of the Knight Faction is within the second princess's hands, yes? You are surprisingly unpopular, Your Majesty."

"The same goes for you. Their leader has been captured, yet none of the sorcerers of Necessarius seem to be coming to rescue you. Have they simply forsaken you, or is this a reversal of trust? I don't quite understand this situation."

The two leaders, having been hopeful for reinforcements, sighed at their misguided expectations. It was a simple gesture, the kind one might give after holding your hand out to stop a taxi and watching it drive by you.

Laura strained against her confinements, causing them to creak. "Urgh. I must say, to bind us above and below our breasts, they must be professionals. But I would appreciate it if they didn't underestimate the English Puritan archbishop!!"

"…But they're just pads, which wouldn't hurt, so maybe you're actually fine?"

"You fool!! These are verifiably genuine! Not that—I mean that the history of physical restraints is one and the same with the history of witch-hunting. In other words, we were responsible for all the restraints, torture instruments, and execution tools developed in this country. 'Twould it not be queer for me not to know how to undo them?"

The escort knight nearly got up out of his seat when he heard the dangerous talk, but the queen, in a cold tone of voice, added, "But you can't, can you?"

"Wha—?"

"We've known each other a long time. I know you want to show off, but now that you've already failed, you've clearly lost your head. Let me warn you off this before anyone starts getting too hopeful. Stop trying. Not thirty seconds later you're tugging at your restraints and griping. Once we're attacked from all sides at once, it'll just ruin your mood, and you won't be able to endure that. Don't force yourself."

"I—I can too endure it!! The English Puritan archbishop is also the leader of Necessarius, you know! Where would I be if I couldn't cope with vast kinds of sorcery from throughout the world?!"

"…So that's the kind of pressure you're feeling. I get it—I really do."

"Wh-wha…? F-fine then!! If that's what you want, I'll show you right now! Showtime!!"

Laura Stuart shouted, tied to the seat by fifty restraints, and for some reason, her abnormally long blond hair began to gleam.

The escort knight, thinking she was about to coil her hair around to undo the locks, reached for the sword on his waist, but something was strange.

It could be described in sound effects.

Her hair's *sheeeen* became a *glaaaaare!!*

To put it in slightly more explanatory terms, a golden light too bright to bear had filled the inside of the carriage. Yes—almost as though it were about to cause a massive explosion.

Without thinking, the knight shouted, "G-gwaaaahhhh?! Y-you fool, I thought you were trying to escape, but could it just be a bomb—?!"

"Be quiet already!! What matters is if I get these fifty restraints

off, I'll be the winner!!"

And then—

—with a bright-sounding *bwooom*, the cart exploded from within.

The two horses pulling the carriage gave high-pitched neighs at the excessive impact, and the explosion threw the drivers into a nearby stream, into which they splashed and sloshed. Then, scattering the wreckage like flowers, Laura Stuart stood alone in the middle of the wheelless cart, hands on her hips, drawn up to full height.

"Hm. Well, they were resisting my 'hair clips.' This much seems appropriate."

"…I—I get it. Now I know exactly how little common sense you have," groaned the queen, turned sideways in her seat, still fixed in place by her restraints. "Well, if you undid them, then fine. Free me, too, and quickly. We have to get away from here before those knights realize something's up and send in reinforcem—"

"Hmm…? I wonder, what should I do about your restraints, meow?"

"…Hey." Feeling a chill run down her spine, Elizard carefully asked, "You *do* understand the situation we're in, right? If what those knights said is true, their coup d'état has taken control of almost all of Britain. The mastermind, my daughter Carissa, has cut ties with Academy City and might shoot missiles at France. This could be our only way to stop her and this disaster…"

"Well, but…Your heartless words hurt me gravely, Your Majesty. Hmm…I know. I might be more willing if you said something like, 'I'm terribly sorry, wonderful Archbishop. A worm such as myself is only good for granting advice to the Puritan Faction.' Then I might be able to make calm decisions. But you don't have to…"

"Wh-why, you…?!"

Elizard's cheeks twitched, but there was no point in arguing now. The Queen Regnant had a duty that was more important than personal pride—the duty to be concerned about her nation's future. She'd have to accept the demand…but just as the queen resolved herself, she heard a *snap*.

The seat apparently hadn't been able to withstand Laura's

explosion. As the cracks spread through the seat, the restraints binding Queen Elizard to the seat began to break of their own accord.

"…"

"…"

Elizard and Laura said nothing for a few moments.

Eventually, the queen slowly rose and brushed the dirt off her ostentatious dress. Then she reached for something that had fallen amid the wrecked carriage.

"Oh, what's the Curtana Second doing in a place like this?"

"Wait, wait! I'm sorry for getting so full of myself, so don't point that national treasure at me!!"

"Don't worry about it. This sword isn't for killing anyway. It's ceremonial—doesn't even have a blade, see? …All it can really do is cut dimensions a little, so you've nothing to worry about."

"Wouldn't that mean death?! Wait, the Original stole almost all its power, and that's *all* it has left?!"

Laura trembled, trying to make herself small, but the queen wasn't really going to fillet her like a fish. After returning the Curtana Second to its sheath, Elizard sighed. "Anyway, when you consider that they wanted us in London, everything you just did was a complete waste. We might as well have gone to the capital and started rampaging." As she spoke, she looked around. "You did a wonderful job on the carriage. It'll have to move some other way now."

"…I-in that case, I have a quite ingenious stratagem."

Laura wobbled back to her feet and looked into the darkness.

From it, they could make out what looked like car headlights coming closer.

Elizard was shocked. "D-don't tell me you're going to do the legendary—"

"Ta-daa! My grand hitchhiking stratagem!! Hey, hey, you there, the filthy-looking truck operator! Would you happen to have any desire to drive with a beautiful lady such as myself?!"

Laura Stuart stuck out her right thumb and struck a pose, topped with a glamorous wink.

After that, the truck came to a slow stop fifty meters in front of her, did a slow U-turn, and, with precise driving technique, left.

Laura, face still stuck in a smile and glamorous wink, said, "… Get him?"

“Are you dumb? The driver made the right choice,” said Elizard, looking at her like she’d look at useless garbage, before suddenly spotting a Soul Arm in the carriage wreckage.

It appeared to be the one the knights were using to communicate.

“I see,” said the queen. “…So, William Orwell has returned, Ascalon in hand.”

“Acqua of the Back from the Roman Orthodox Church? As the leader of the Puritan Faction, this gives me complicated emotions, but if he has come as a mercenary unswayed by the intentions of groups such as the Knights, he is for the third princess, Vilian, the mightiest dagger. In fact, it seems just like a chance to turn the situation around, does it not?”

“The strongest, eh…?” said the queen, tossing the communicator Soul Arm aside. “…But will things be that easy?”

“I’m terribly apologetic to interject as you mutter profound things only you understand and then bask in the afterglow, but what, pray tell, should we actually do? You’re not telling me to ambulate my way through this dark forest, I hope.”

“Really? Thanks for ruining the mood over here,” spat Elizard before looking around.

Her eyes stopped on the two horses that had been pulling the carriage. The tools attaching them to the carriage had been torn apart. The queen gently batted them away, then quickly mounted a horse, which didn’t even have a saddle.

As Elizard took the reins—which were awfully long, due to their being made for controlling the horses from the carriage—and bundled them in her hands so they’d be easy to use on horseback, Laura made a clearly displeased face.

“Whaaat…? I don’t understand barbaric things like how to ride war horses.”

“All right, let’s go. We’re off to London!”

“You’re about to leave me behind here with a smile! Oi!! Wait, wait, at this rate I’ll be all by myself…And hitchhiking is out of the question!!”

Touma Kamijou managed to make it to the English Puritan women’s dorm.

It was his first time in the building, but he didn’t have time for

sightseeing. All of the bare necessities had been carried away, and it also looked like most of the people had already fled. The only ones left were those whose job was combat, bringing up the rear and stalling the Knights' pursuit. It pained Kamijou to ask them to save Lesser with their healing magic when she was originally an enemy sorcerer from New Light, but…

"Oh my. It has been quite a while."

"Wait, Orsola?! You have zero combat power—you should have run away first thing! What are you doing here?!"

"Well, everyone was in such a hurry that I couldn't keep up with them."

There was supposed to be a limit to how dull someone could be. This was Kamijou's acquaintance, Orsola Aquinas. A huge-knockered older woman who specialized in deciphering the encryption in grimoires.

She looked at Lesser, who was hanging limp in Kamijou's arms. "My. The same development as always, I see."

"…I don't get your meaning, but anyway, would it be all right to leave her in your care?"

After she gave him an "Okey-dokey. With healing magic, right?" Kamijou handed the New Light girl over to Orsola.

…It seemed like the sister, in exchange for being awful at ever-changing, high-speed combat, was fairly good at work she could do at leisure. Despite not being an expert in healing magic, it seemed like she'd manage with some simple first aid, just repairing the torn blood vessels.

"I know it's rude of me to ask, but in exchange…"

"I know. I'll be one of the rear guard, too, and help you all escape," answered Kamijou, waggling his right hand.

Saying the Imagine Breaker might get in her spell's way, Kamijou left Orsola for the time being. As he walked through a dark passage where the lights were dimmed, he encountered a nun who had remained here as the rear guard (and this one with a serious, sharp look on her face).

The blond-haired, blue-eyed woman did him the favor of speaking in Japanese. "The Knights are steadily shoring up all entrance routes, including the secret entrance you slipped in through. We'll have no choice but to break through their numbers… Can I count on your help?"

"What's the plan?"

“After shaking the Knights up with all the long-range bombardment we can muster, everyone will break out and flee in all directions. We’ll stall for time as they’re scared and wondering what to do, but I can’t calculate who will end up drawing the short straw.”

Another improvised plan, thought Kamijou with a smile. “Anyway, what the heck do those Knights want to do with this coup d’état? I thought the country was just having problems getting resources supplied. Why would they want to be isolated…?”

“According to the intelligence we’ve intercepted, they seem to have their eyes on marine resources,” said the nun. “Britain’s ability to be self-sufficient isn’t that low. While we would face several ill effects in daily life, we wouldn’t immediately starve to death. Queen Elizard was acting carefully out of concern that the populace would riot out of unhappiness, but the second princess, Carissa, is trying to stamp out the problem in a completely different way.”

“By using the military on a national level and suppressing the nation by force…”

“With regard to foodstuffs, the main concern is that about half our seafood is reliant on foreign imports, but they may be able to manage by reviving the closed harbors. Whatever the case is, the civilians won’t ever cause riots if they risk people being slaughtered by the hundreds or thousands. Normally, people can tolerate most things if they’re held at sword-point.”

“But food’s not the only problem, is it? What about oil and metals like iron?”

“They appear to seriously believe they’ll be able to mine it from mountains on the seafloor. Britain has always been an island nation, protected by a natural rampart in the ocean, but it has planted things on the seafloor to make that rampart more effective. I hear that Carissa and the Knights have been working on them in secret, preparing to convert them into large-scale excavation sites…

“Still, if everything will really go that well for them, I’m not sure why the queen would fret over the seafloor tunnel being bombed,” said the nun.

She ended the topic there and returned to the mission at hand. “Regarding what to do after breaking through the Knights encircling the dormitory…We’ll all be heading for a designated meet-up point, but I believe you would be better served heading for Waterloo Station…I know the basic circumstances. Don’t worry—if

you use the Eurostar line, you can go straight to Folkestone, where the Index is waiting."

"…That might be hard." Kamijou made a bitter face, and as he brought Index to mind, he said, "The overhang and the rails were severed by stray shots in the battle. I don't think that train is going anywhere."

It was over one hundred kilometers from London to Folkestone. He couldn't very well walk there. The only way would be to use a train or something.

"That isn't necessarily true," said the nun.

Kamijou looked at her again.

"She may have the Curtana Original, but the second princess, Carissa, the commander in chief of the Knights, hasn't entered any specific fortress, so she's currently exposed in Folkestone. In order to prepare enough forces against the Puritans, the Knights will need to transport people and goods and quickly get their defenses nailed down…In other words, they'll need to move that train, no matter what."

"Which means…?"

"In case of power outages or electric transmission difficulties, they have diesel cars that will pull the other cars behind them. Even if they're useless when the lines are cut, they can still be moved. The Knights will probably use a crane to try to cross the broken overhang. If you can sneak into their ranks during that time…"

The path to Folkestone would be open.

Kamijou's right hand naturally balled into a fist at the nun's words.

Seeing that, the nun said quietly, "…But that all comes after we escape from here safely."

"Fine by me…As long as I've got a goal, this is as good as won."

The two of them began to prepare for battle.

To the town of Folkestone in the south of England came one man:

William Orwell.

Seeing the tall man holding a Soul Arm called Ascalon, having rushed here to rescue Third Princess Vilian, Second Princess Carissa gave a thin smile.

Unswayed by the intentions of any organization, he had, at times, unhesitatingly crushed plots laid even by the Royal Family

Faction—all “for the good of Britain.” A detestable man.

As everyone stood dumbfounded at the arrival of a certain mercenary, she thought, *Ascalon? The holy sword, the Soul Arm, from the legend of St. George?*

Carissa knew.

Knew the man originally specialized in water. Knew that after his mercenary days, he had evolved his power as a member of God’s Right Seat, and that it would be strange if he didn’t wield incredible might.

Why does he need something like that? Folkestone is a port town. And there’s a mountain providing water right nearby. His proud water is everywhere—so why would he bother to rely on an easily understood weapon like Ascalon?

And then she knew.

Knew why this certain mercenary hadn’t used the water. Until now, Britain and Academy City had a pipeline built between them. Because of that, she’d heard the reports that a man named Acqua of the Back, who commanded the Power of God, had invaded Academy City—and that he’d lost.

He’s injured. That’s why he can’t use the water. That’s why he has to rely on that overblown Soul Arm. And if he’s a mere saint now, one who has lost his power, the Knight Leader in his current state can easily drive him back. This isn’t just theory, either. He’s already proven it in his fight with the saint from the Far East.

As she matched the information she already had with the information she was getting now, Carissa smiled.

Ultimately, she came to this conclusion:

…If we do it now, we can kill him. We can kill that detestable mercenary with our own hands.

AFTERWORD

To all those who have been reading one volume at a time, it's good to see you again.

To those who have read through all nineteen volumes in a row, it's good to meet you.

I'm Kazuma Kamachi.

This is Volume 17. I decided to set out all kinds of British affairs, which I've touched on here and there in the past. The Royal Family, the Knights, the Puritans, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Island…Everything from structured organizations to UK-based sorcerer's societies, and even unsettling happenings between nations—I packed it all in.

The story being about Britain, knights and princesses appear.

St. George was a saint who actually existed. However, I tweaked things to make the Knights more likable and to make it seem more like a picture book, which is the story given in the main text and on the frontispiece, which Mr. Haimura helped me with.

It's an altered version, so the historical St. George never owned a sword called Ascalon—and one of the characters in this book mentions this briefly. I asked for the knights' and princesses' clothing to be more picture-book-esque as well. Please treat all of it as their story in an in-universe picture book.

Thank you to my illustrator, Mr. Haimura, and my editor, Mr. Miki. I really appreciate the help you provided with the special experiment we used as a frontispiece.

And thank you to all my readers. It's thanks to your support, to your turning so many pages, that I think I can write to the twentieth book.

Now then, as you turn this page here,
And as I hope that you'll open my twentieth book if possible,
Here now, I lay down my pen.

Next up is a battle between knight and mercenary!!

Kazuma Kamachi

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